

## Finding Mara

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## Finding Mara

by [Thanatopsiturvy](#)

### Summary

*With every passing day his uncertainty and restlessness had only grown. Whiterun's walls seemed to loom ever taller, his routine becoming stagnant and painfully predictable. He felt the itch.*

In which an ex-Psijic monk goes on a journey to find himself, confronts the shadows of his past, burns bridges, builds new ones, and forges a future that's worth living for.

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Spin-off story starring Nilandur, following the events of [Invictus](#)

### Notes

Hello beautiful readers! Welcome to the next adventure!

When I first started writing *Invictus*, I didn't really have any plans for Nilandur, ~~(and originally intended to kill him off at the end of the story lksjfasj)~~, but he managed to burrow his way deep into my heart, and surprisingly into a lot of other people's as well. I've gotten a lot of questions about his backstory and this and that, and decided that he really needed his own tale. Especially since he was hardly given a resolution.

I will say, if you're finding this story and haven't read *Invictus*... this is one of the few time's I'm gonna say [go read that first, if you can](#). It's not a short read, and god, it's a lot... so no hard feelings if you don't feel up to it! There's just... a lot that happened in that story that this one hinges upon.

All that being said, I hope you enjoy! This story has been a little tough to write. I love Nil so much, and he hits very close to home in a lot of ways. It's been great to see him grow as a character.

Much love!

~Topsy

[Thanks so much to [deludedwriting](#) for being a second pair of eyes and an endless source of encouragement and enthusiasm. <3]

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)



## Song of the Return







*Is no one near to help me? No fair dawn  
Of life from charitable voice? No sweet saying  
To set my dull and sadden'd spirit playing?  
No hand to toy with mine? No lips so sweet  
That I may worship them? No eyelids meet  
To twinkle on my bosom? No one dies  
Before me, till from these enslaving eyes  
Redemption sparkles!--I am sad and lost.*

*John Keats, Endymion: Book IV*

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“Nilandur! Did you organize those scrolls the way I asked?”

The enchanted dagger unraveled in Nilandur’s hands, the threads of its magicka uncoiling and the metal dissolving to dust. He straightened up, digging his knuckles into his lower back before turning to Farengar with a sheepish smile.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he offered, “I got a bit distracted. I’ll get to that now.”

“Why do you offer to do such menial tasks when it’s clear you want to do the heavy lifting?”

There was a brief and awkward pause between them. “I’m here to offer assistance,” Nil explained, fidgeting with the hem of his sleeve. “And besides, you’re the Court Wizard, not I. I intentionally leave the more complex tasks to you.”

Farengar huffed and turned towards his desk, shuffling books about. “Well then start actually assisting me, then. Why someone with your level of skill insists on hanging around Whiterun is beyond me. You should be up at the Mage’s College teaching.” He stacked several loose papers into a messy pile. “You should be *running* the College, if anything.”

“Now, I don’t know about all that—”

“Nilandur,” Farengar sighed, turning towards him. “You’ve been studying magic longer than I’ve



been alive.” He handed Nil the stack of mismatched papers. “Why are you here?”

Nilandur swallowed, taking the stack with a thin smile.

“I’ll suppose I’ll organize these as well?” Farengar said nothing, and instead he brushed past him with another loud sigh, leaving Nilandur to his tasks.

The archives room of Dragonsreach was a mess, as usual. Nilandur had taken it upon himself to organize the place as a sort of pet project – something to pass the time and make some extra coin. The room itself, only about the size of his own living room, was far too small to house the grand collection. What it lacked in floor space, however, it made up for in height. The ceiling stretched well up into the second story, ladders leaning haphazardly against the bookshelves, extending past the rafters. The air was constantly swirling with dust motes, which made Nil sneeze.

He set the newest stack of papers at the end of a long table lined with similar stacks: tied scrolls, old books, journals, and pamphlets. He sighed and rolled up his sleeves, determined to make a dent today. He’d start by sorting the loose papers into three piles: historical, arcane, and other. Yes, that was a good place to start. As he began, he lifted the first stack and promptly sneezed.

An hour passed and the ‘other’ pile was significantly larger than the other two, leaving Nil feeling as though his plan was failing. That particular sorting method had worked quite well in the college library on Artaeum, but the Nords had such peculiar record-keeping habits. For instance, there were more than a few documents that seemed to just be odd grocery lists. Nilandur wasn’t sure if those belonged under ‘historical’ or ‘arcane’, because while tomatoes and pine thrush eggs seemed like reasonable things to eat, a giant’s kneecap, three strands of braided horse hair, and two male draugr nipples didn’t really seem edible or alchemical. He chewed at his lip and set the most recent list down, pushing hair out of his face in frustration. He could probably throw half of these papers away and nobody would notice—

“Nilandur of Cloudrest?”

Nil’s attention snapped to the door and he straightened up, instinctively brushing off his robes. “Yes?”

It was the courier. “I have a letter for you. Your hands only.”

“Naturally,” Nilandur laughed, stepping towards him. He took the thin parcel and turned it over to inspect the seal; Skyrim’s royal insignia.

“Letter from the King, huh? Moving on up in the world?”

“Oh, no.” Nil tucked the letter into his robes with a gentle smile. “Nothing like that.”

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The diced onions, leeks, and tomatoes hissed and popped as Nilandur added water. Next, a generous helping of salt, a bit of coveted crushed hot pepper, and a sprig of rosemary from his herb garden, which currently resided in his kitchen window – he'd have a real one some day. Covering the pot, he flipped his small hourglass to keep time, (a sentimental gift from Teldryn for Saturalia). He stoked the fire one last time before moving into his small sitting area, wiping his brow on the back of his sleeve. He picked up the unopened letter from earlier and plopped down into one of his padded chairs. It was from Ulfric – he knew that without even having to open it – but Nilandur liked to make a little ritual of reading his letters. Dinner first, then tea, then letter-reading. He ran his thumb over the seal with a soft smile on his lips before resting it in his lap. He took a long moment to simply enjoy the quiet of his own home.

He'd moved into his flat almost a year ago; it would be a year on the second of Sun's Dawn, which was only a week away. Even though the place was small, it was perfect for him. His kitchen and living room were combined into one cozy space and only a few steps away from each other. Both rooms were lined with bookshelves and cabinets of ingredients, nicknacks and gifts. His bedroom was a bit of a mess, but usually his only guests were Aerik and Teldryn, and they rarely wandered in there. Well, except for when Aerik wanted to snoop. The cooking pot began to rattle and Nilandur got to his feet, shuffling over to remove the lid and stir the contents.

Two heaping bowls of stew later, Nilandur finally felt full. In the past year, he'd grown a bit soft around the middle: the result of a slow life with no small amount of fine foods. Cooking was his comfort. Food gave him an excuse to gather with others and surround himself with friends. So why shouldn't he indulge in such an interest? He poured the leftovers into a glass jar, covered the opening, and stored it away in his small, cool pantry. He'd have the rest for breakfast. If he remembered.

Tea, then letter, as his routine went.

He chose snowberry tea for the evening. It chased away the cold and left Nilandur's hands and feet feeling warm. He tried to sit by the fire for a moment, silently sipping his tea, but the letter caught his eye again. He nibbled at his lip for a moment longer, vacillating, before he snatched it from the table and moved into his bedroom. He placed his tea bowl at the top of his desk before sliding into the worn chair, letter in hand. With a quick, precise slide of his thumb, he broke the seal, unfolding and smoothing the paper out against the table. He began to read:

*Dearest Nilandur,*

*Your last letter brought me great joy. I'm pleased to hear that life is treating you well. Assisting Jarl Gray-Mane's court wizard is an excellent use of your skills. I would be bereft were I not to admit my jealousy that your presence graces his court and not my own.*

*The upcoming year brings great changes for myself as well as for Skyrim. I will be returning to Windhelm for an extended stay at the Palace of the Kings to rule from my old throne. Elisif will be remaining in Solitude as both Queen and Jarl. We plan to divide our rule across the country so that*

*She may feel balanced and equally tended to - so that Her people feel held. The war left myriad wounds, lacerations that have merely scabbed in the past year. Even tending to the smallest cuts will be of great benefit to the whole.*

*Upon your receiving of this letter, I will most likely already be en route to Whiterun. I plan to stay for a day's time, simply to allow my party rest. Your beauty and your company are two of the things I look forward to most.*

*Expect my arrival by the 26th of Morning Star.*

*Yours,*

*High King Ulfric Stormcloak*

Nilandur's heart was beating wildly in his chest. He bit his lip through an overjoyed smile, folding the page back up and placing it in the drawer with the rest of Ulfric's letters. In two days time Ulfric would be here, in the city. Very possibly in his flat.

He had to clean.

He sprung to his feet, looking frantically about his room. Taking a hasty sip of tea, Nilandur began to shuffle about, folding clothes and organizing things that had been long forgotten. His mind wandered as he worked. They had only seen each other three times since Ulfric and Elisif's wedding, though they'd written to each other constantly.

All three times they'd been intimate.

Nilandur shoved a stack of books a bit too roughly onto one of his bookshelves, heat creeping up the back of his neck and warming his ears. He'd told himself that he wouldn't, that every time would be the last. Ulfric was spoken for. Even more than that, but the man was his *king*. The moral implications were staggering for both of them, and yet...

It was incredibly difficult to say 'no' to Ulfric Stormcloak. Nilandur had only ever managed it once, and even yet, here he was, tidying his house like a panicked maid, looking at his own bed and letting his mind drift to inappropriate places. So how much had he *actually* said no? He paused to take another sip of tea, using a spare piece of ribbon to tie his hair into a low tail. He debated letting Aerik and Teldryn know ahead of time, but figured that could only lead to more complications. No. He'd lay low, and he'd let Ulfric seek him out.

Finally, his house was clean enough for him to feel a bit better, though no less calm. He tried to sit, but his leg bounced wildly with barely-contained anxiety. He ended up reading the letter several more times. After the third read, Nilandur couldn't help but notice that Ulfric had failed to mention a fairly important recent event: that Elisif was with child. The news had spread through the country like a lightning strike. The new high King and Queen of Skyrim were expecting an heir. When he'd first caught wind of the news, it had punched the air from his lungs, made the ever growing pit of anxiety in Nilandur's stomach swell into a yawning chasm.



With every passing day his uncertainty and restlessness had only grown. Whiterun's walls seemed to loom ever taller, his routine becoming stagnant and painfully predictable. He felt the itch. It was the same itch he'd felt in the last few weeks he'd spent on Artaeum, when the soft, pastel pink skies became less and less awe-inspiring, the monotony of the days a punishment rather than a relief.

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*"Artaeum isn't a prison, Nilandur. You're free to come and go as you please." His mentor, Aminwe, had a pained look on her face. "You don't have to shirk your position or leave the order."*

*"I don't want to seem ungrateful." Nilandur twisted his hair around his finger nervously. "I've learned more during my time here than I could have ever possibly dreamed of learning in my lifetime. It's just..." But what was it? Life on the island was ideal. Why did he want to leave?*

*Aminwe gave him a sad, knowing smile. "Whatever your life brings you, going forward, I wish you the best. I truly hope you find what you're looking for."*

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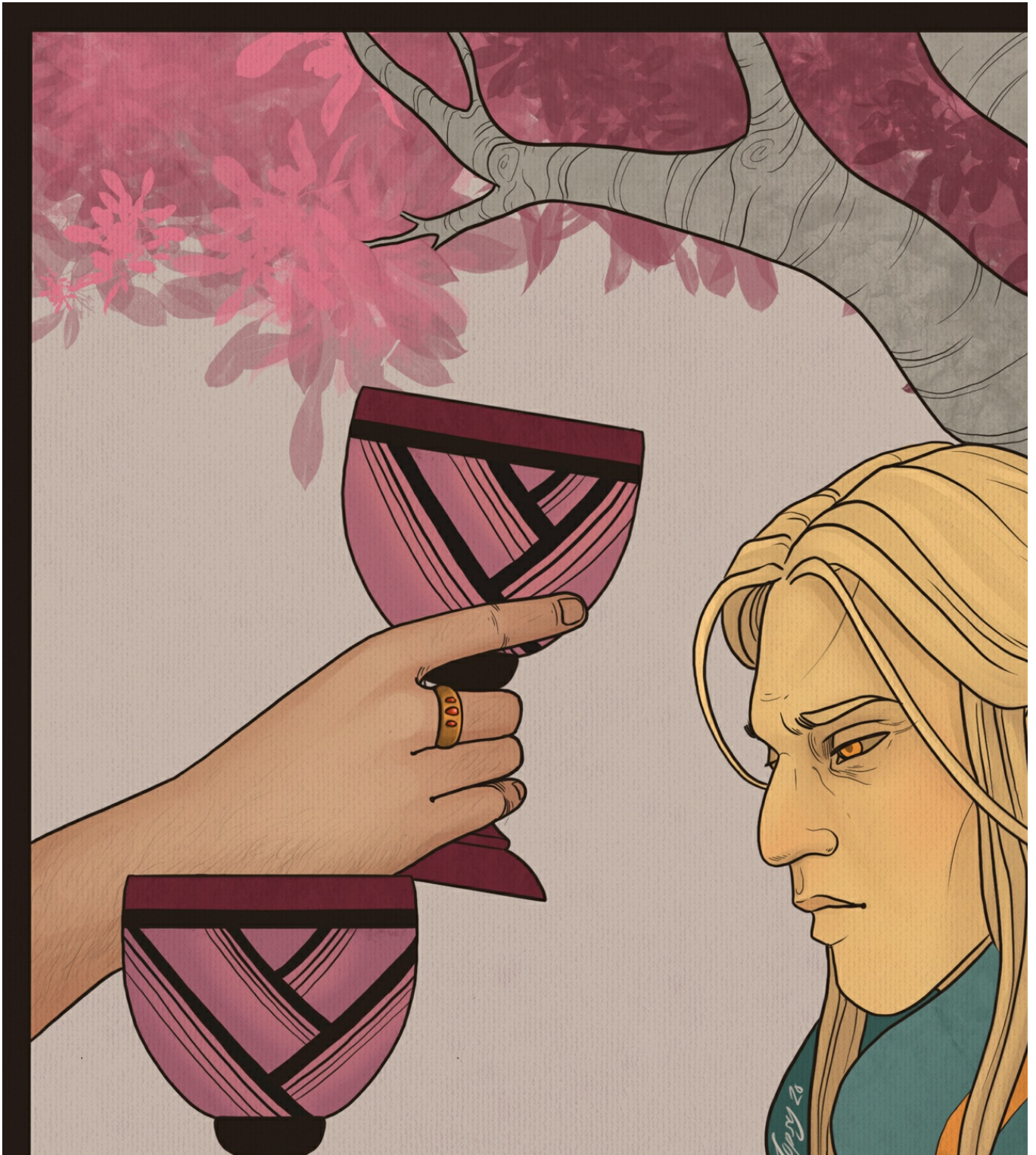
Nilandur stared blankly into the hearthfire, his mind clouded and turbulent. The sun had long set, his now spotless kitchen and sitting room turned dark and cool despite the glowing embers of the fire. Shaking himself from his reverie, he pushed to his feet and placed his empty tea bowl on the counter. He swiftly extinguished the lights with a wave of his hand before retreating to his room. His bed felt cold and far too large as he slid beneath the covers, and after several hours of tossing and turning, Nilandur finally fell into a dreamless sleep.

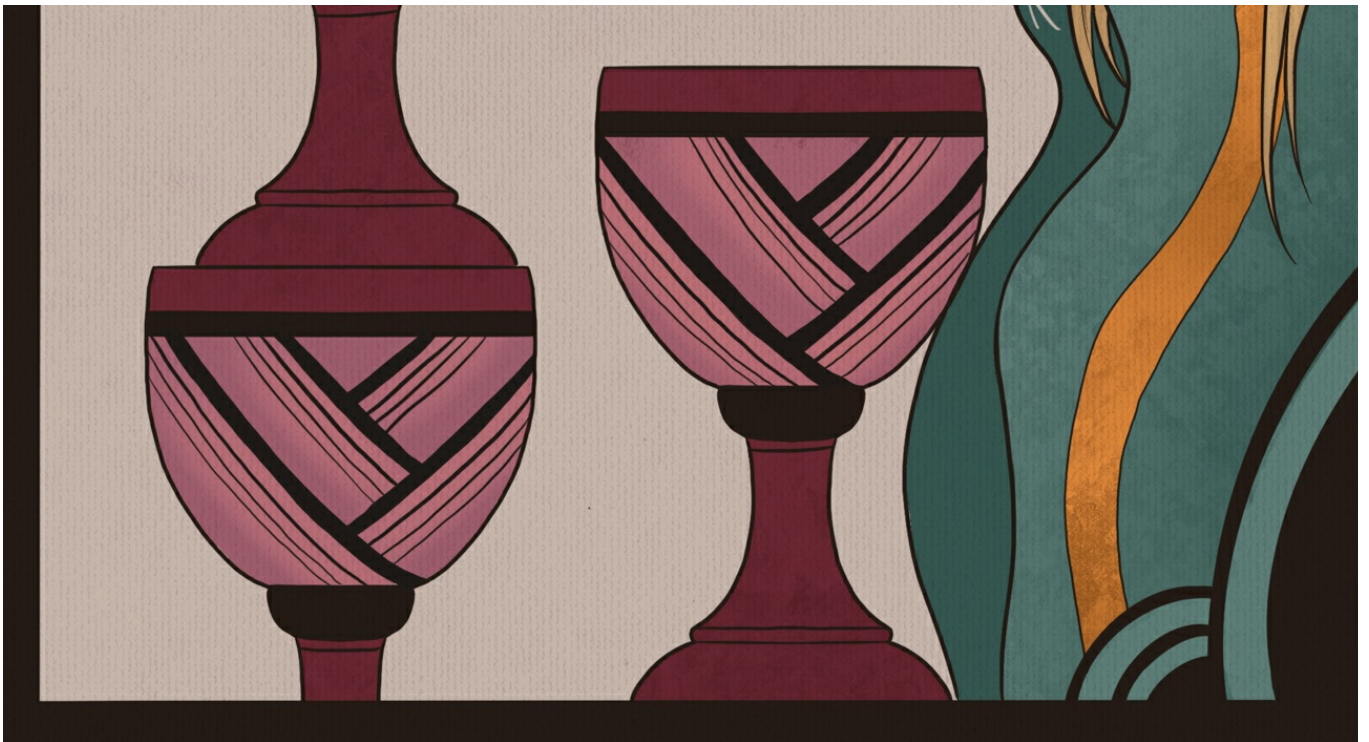
# A Barren Field

## Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to [deludedwriting](#) and [LyleSnake](#) for being my betas for this chapter!

*[Mild CW for this chapter: Sexual content, general awkwardness]*





“Nilandur.” Danica Pure-Spring had a beautiful accent. Nil loved the way she curled the ‘r’ at the end of his name and deepened the ‘u’.

“Yes, my dear?” He set down the basket of blue mountain flowers and wheat, brushing off the front of his robes.

“I believe we have a handle on things this morning.” She offered him a kind, sympathetic smile. “You’re welcome to go whenever you’d like.”

“Oh.” Nilandur looked around the temple of Kynareth. It was practically empty, save for two other priestesses tending to an elderly farmer swaddled in a dull marigold blanket and being handed a cup of tea. “Well alright then. I’ll... be around. Don’t hesitate to call upon me for anything!”

Danica smiled and bowed, but said nothing further.

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Whiterun looked picturesque from Dragonsreach – the jagged rooflines formed interlocking, angular patterns, like Nordic war paint spread across the landscape. Nilandur sat on the edge of the stone wall, a book in his lap, his legs dangling over the rushing water. His heels tapped against the rock, too jittery to do anything other than stare blankly at the page. The restlessness gnawed at him, seeping into every aspect of his daily life. He was unwanted in both Dragonsreach and the Temple of Kynareth. Aerik and Teldryn were busy with their own life together, set in their routine, ever-infatuated with each other’s company. Nilandur loved them both dearly, but sometimes it was difficult to be around them – to be a third wheel when two knew how to function so well on their own. He sighed, closed his book, and set it off to the side. Leaning back on his hands, he looked up at the sky. It was a beautiful, cloudless day. The chill of winter still clung to the shadows, frosting



the grass before the sun rose high enough to thaw the ground. Spring was a month away and Nilandur couldn't wait for it to arrive. He pulled his feet up to sit cross-legged on the wall, resting his hands in his lap. Closing his eyes, he attempted to meditate, drawing his attention to his breath. He felt the push and pull of the Weave pulsating around him, within him – reconnecting himself to his magicka, to Nirn.

The sound of bellowing horns broke his concentration, and he let out a frustrated huff, opening his eyes with a scowl. A rather large party was moving up the main thoroughfare of Whiterun, almost to the Gildergreen, a crowd drawing around them. Nilandur gasped as realization struck him. Scrambling to his feet, he grabbed his book and stepped lightly along the stone wall, over to the stairs. He quickly brushed off his robes and combed through his hair with his fingers, wincing when he felt more knots than expected. The king's party made their way up the stairs to Dragonsreach, painfully slow, and Nilandur felt as though his heart might pound its way through his sternum before they managed to get to the top step. Ulfric looked up, caught his eyes, and nodded solemnly. Nil's throat tightened, his heart seizing. He returned the gesture with a deep bow.

“Your Highness.”

“Nilandur.” Ulfric stopped beside him, so close that Nil could reach out and run his fingers across the fur of his cloak if he wanted to. He felt the eyes of the party turn to him, felt their heavy stares. He did his best to ignore them, focusing instead on Ulfric's face. He had aged, even in the short time they'd been apart. The gray at his temples had lightened and spread, beginning to dust his beard as well. *Why must humans age so quickly?*

Nilandur realized he was staring and jolted. “I...” What could he say? “I hope your stay in Whiterun is pleasant.”

The corner of Ulfric's lip twitched in the barest hint of a smile. “Your sentiment is very much appreciated. Thank you.” He turned and continued along the walkway to the massive front doors of Dragonsreach. Nil watched the entire party disappear inside before letting out a tremendous sigh and trudging down the steps.

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It was an hour past sundown when Nilandur finally heard a knock at his door.

He'd been mid-sip and nearly choked on his tea. Coughing, he got to his feet and skittered over, taking a moment to calm himself before opening the door. In a swift flurry of motion, a hooded figure swooped through the doorway and immediately pressed the door shut behind them.

“Oh, I...” Whatever Nilandur had been about to say caught in his throat as Ulfric pushed the dark cowl from his head, smiling up at him – that boyish, charming smile he always seemed to save just for him. Ulfric didn't say anything, just reached up to thread his fingers through Nilandur's hair, cup his jaw, and bring him forward for a kiss. And oh... Nilandur's knees buckled and he grasped Ulfric's shoulders, kissing back as fiercely as he dared.

He hadn't wanted to do this. He'd wanted to be good this time, to simply talk first. He'd wanted to

say no, but he never could. Ulfric held him like he was the only thing in the world worth holding, his hands warm and firm against Nilandur's back, urging him closer. Finally, Ulfric pulled away, just enough to speak, their noses brushing.

"I missed you," he confessed, his voice little more than a low rumble.

"Clearly..." Nilandur was breathless and smiling. Ulfric just smirked, sweeping a thumb across Nil's cheek before pulling him back in for another kiss, this time slower and sweeter. It made Nilandur burn.

He wasn't sure what he imagined, but immediately being guided to his own bedroom wasn't necessarily part of Nilandur's daydreamings. Ulfric dropped his cloak by the door, pawed at Nilandur's clothing, and grumbled at the fastenings, making Nil laugh. He let Ulfric pull the layers of his clothes away, let him run his hands wherever he pleased, let himself be pushed backwards onto the bed, covered by Ulfric's own body – always so warm, these Nords, like the hearthfires that heated their homes. Nil sucked in a stuttering inhale as Ulfric palmed his arousal, let his hand slide lower, lower...

"Please." Ulfric spoke against his temple, "I want to be inside you."

Nil's resolve came to a grinding halt.

"Ah..." He let out an awkward laugh and pulled Ulfric's hand from between his legs, his pulse thrumming loudly in his own ears. "I'd really rather not..."

"You have nothing to worry about." Ulfric used his other hand to brush some of Nil's hair out of his face, smiling so softly. "It will feel good. I just... I want to be as close to you as possible."

It was a lovely sentiment – if only it didn't make Nilandur feel as though he wanted to immediately become ill or bolt from the room. *Say no. You can say no.* Nilandur smiled, but it felt weak and forced. He traced one of Ulfric's braids with his thumb, running his fingers down his jawline.

"I... really don't want to. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Ulfric sighed heavily, his shoulders sagging a bit, but he leaned in to kiss Nilandur, deep and slow. "Another time perhaps."

"Yes," Nilandur agreed far too quickly. His heart was still pounding, his entire body buzzing, alight with panic and shame. He regretted his choice immediately. He should have just agreed instead of making a fuss. But it was too late for that now.

To make up for being yet another let-down, Nilandur decided he'd try pleasuring Ulfric with his mouth. It would still be a first, but at least he'd be more in control. Ulfric made a shocked, reverent little sound when Nil began, spurring him on enough to shake the last bit of nervousness from his mind. The entire process was... unpleasant. His jaw ached, and it was hard to breathe; Ulfric's hand on the back of his head felt more daunting than encouraging, especially when his fingers curled, grabbing a fistful of Nil's hair, only to release seconds later. Nilandur closed his eyes and tried to recall the few times the act had been performed on him. Brea had seemed to very much enjoy it, and the respect he already had for her increased tenfold. He tried to copy the things she'd done: use his hand, hollow his cheeks... He closed his eyes, relaxing the slightest bit, feeling as though he might actually be getting the hang of it.

Ulfric came without warning, and Nilandur gagged. He sat back on his heels, wiping his mouth

across the back of his arm and letting his hair cover his face as he struggled to swallow it down. He was mortified.

Ulfric, however, seemed content, so Nil smiled and ignored the acrid, bitter taste that lingered in the back of his throat, beginning to push up into his nose.

“Let me...” Ulfric’s hand moved sluggishly towards Nilandur’s groin.

“No, no.” Nil squirmed out of the way, kissing Ulfric on the shoulder before he slid off the bed with a smile. “I’m gonna get us something to drink.” He wasn’t hard anymore. He didn’t want Ulfric to see that.

Nilandur washed his mouth out in the kitchen, but water did very little to get rid of the taste. Desperately, he searched for something stronger, fumbling through his own cabinets. He didn't want to keep Ulfric waiting for too long. He suddenly felt chilled and far too exposed, even though he’d stood naked in his own house countless times. Finally, he found a small bottle of wine – another gift from Aerik and Teldryn. “For special occasions,” Aerik had instructed. Nilandur grimaced.

Ulfric’s eyes fluttered open as Nil pushed back into his bedroom. He looked incredibly handsome in his bed – his body relaxed, expression blissful. Nil couldn’t help but feel a little proud that he was the reason behind it. He let Ulfric pull him back down onto the bed and press a languid kiss to his mouth. Nil pulled away a little sooner than he would have liked, self-conscious of his breath.

“Wine?”

“You spoil me,” Ulfric rumbled, tucking a strand of hair behind Nil’s ear.

“Well, this is hardly an environment fit for a king.” Nil shrugged with a small laugh. “I’m trying my best.”

“You’re succeeding.”

They slipped beneath the covers and shared the wine, drinking about half the bottle over light conversation. Ulfric was warm and solid, and Nilandur wished more than anything he could stay and spend the night in his bed.

“You seem distant,” Ulfric remarked after a lull in their conversation.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not something that needs an apology; it’s simply an observation.”

Nilandur took a measured sip from his own cup, eyes unfocused. Ulfric's hand was smoothing across his side, slow and comforting. “I’m just... feeling uneasy again.”

“Again?”

“It’s the same feeling I always get when I’ve been in one place for too long.”

Ulfric hummed in recognition. “The call of the easterly wind.”



“Pardon?”

“Just an expression.” Ulfric tugged him closer. “You’re more than welcome to come to Windhelm with me. The invitation to be my advisor is still yours.”

Nil smiled and finished his drink. He set both of their empty cups on the bedside table before cuddling up against Ulfric’s side, looping their legs together. “You know I appreciate the offer more than I can express, but...” He chewed on his lower lip, pressing his cheek to Ulfric’s shoulder. “I still can’t. I just– I think I need to go my own way.”

Ulfric just hummed, finishing his own cup and setting it down. He pulled Nilandur against his chest, placing a kiss on his forehead.

“Stubborn elf.”

Ulfric left about an hour later. Nilandur sat in his living room wearing a loose-fitting robe, staring into the fire with glazed eyes. The entire evening had him feeling like crawling out of his own skin. He ran a hand over his jaw, pulling at the corners of his mouth, letting out a weary sigh. It was late, but there was no way he could sleep. Not after all that. There was, at least, one other person in Whiterun that was guaranteed to be awake at this hour.

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Nilandur only had to wait a few minutes after knocking on the door to Breezehome before Teldryn answered. He wasn't wearing a shirt and Nilandur suddenly felt very intrusive.

Teldryn seemed unphased, however, giving Nilandur a once-over before jerking his head to motion him inside. "You look terrible."

"I feel terrible."

Teldryn chuckled as he closed the door behind them. "To what do I owe the honor?"

Nilandur glanced up the stairs nervously.

"Aerik has been asleep for a good hour," Teldryn supplied.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you like this..."

"Nilandur."

"Yes, I know, I know..." Nil waved his hand in agitation, falling heavily into a chair near the center hearthfire. "It's..." He sighed loudly, leaning forward against his knees and rubbing at his eyes. Teldryn stood for a moment longer before brushing past, patting him twice on the shoulder.

"I'll put some tea on."

Nilandur wasn't sure how he and Teldryn became such good friends. It happened so organically that there was never really a moment that he could pinpoint as *the* moment. He appreciated their friendship so much, even if he lacked the words to properly express it. Sometimes, he got the feeling that it vexed Aerik a little more than he'd ever admit. He didn't blame him, really, but Nilandur hadn't been able to call anyone his good friend since Kalatar, and, well...

Teldryn returned a moment later and offered him a hot cup of tea, snowberry by the smell of it. Another reminder that Teldryn knew him well. Nil accepted it with a soft thanks.

Teldryn shuffled around the fire to sit down next to him, crossing an ankle over his knee and quirking a brow expectantly. "Ulfric?"

Nil flinched. "Don't tell Aerik..."

"We're past that, Nilandur." Teldryn took a sip of his tea, sighing audibly. "I just don't understand why you're still putting up with it."

"I'm not putting up with it. It's just—" Nil groaned, "I can never seem to say 'no' to him. Or if I do, he acts as if I'm stalling. But *no*, I'm not actually here to talk about that..." Nil huffed in irritation, feeling utterly miserable and stretched too thin.

"What are you here to talk about, then?" Teldryn's eyes looked nearly black in the low light of the embers. There was no hiding anything from him, Nilandur knew that much at this point.

"I want to leave."

"Leave?"

"Whiterun." Nil gazed down into his tea bowl. "I... don't know where I'll go. But I just need to leave this place."

"Nilandur." Teldryn set his cup down, folding his hands in his lap. "Until you find a home within yourself, this desire to flee will never stop. I know you know this."

"I'm not fleeing." Nilandur chewed on his bottom lip, absently rubbing a thumb around the rim of his tea bowl. "I don't... this isn't like the last time. With Artaeum. I just feel trapped. I want to see more of Skyrim, meet more people." He laughed, if not bitterly. "I need to do something with myself. Make something of myself. I have no purpose in this city."

"And you'll find it out there?" Teldryn gestured in a vague direction. "Satisfaction isn't some kind of beast to be hunted down. It's something that is cultivated." The lecture had Nil feeling like another disappointment for the evening.

"Listen," Teldryn continued, "I'm not going to stop you. In fact, I know that I couldn't, even if I tried. But please, just... *think* before you act."

"You know I wouldn't be here if I didn't value your advice," Nilandur implored.

"And yet..."

"Oh, hush." Nilandur couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up.

Teldryn chuckled lowly, picking up his tea bowl. "So tell me what happened with Ulfric."

“No. Oh, merciful Mara, no...”

“You know I won’t judge you.”

“Yes, but *I* will.”

Nilandur told him anyway, avoiding the explicit details. Teldryn just listened and nodded, as he always did. It felt good to get it off his chest, at least – to have someone witness him. After another cup of tea, a small bit of bread and cheese, and a hug that was probably longer than Teldryn preferred, Nilandur made his way back towards his own flat. He felt lighter and a bit more optimistic. Had Teldryn told him, in so many words, that he should just stay put? Yes. But Teldryn had also planted a seed in his mind – satisfaction is worth cultivating. Whiterun was a barren field for him. How could he grow a garden when the soil was fallow?

Once home, he divested quickly and crawled into bed. His stomach still clenched uncomfortably at the memories of what had happened only a few hours prior, but he pulled the covers up around his shoulders, determined to get a good night’s rest. Tomorrow he’d wake up early to pack his things. He’d let Farengar and Danica know he would no longer be assisting them. He’d sit down with Aerik and explain his plan.

Tomorrow he’d start his own adventure.



# Beyond the Pale

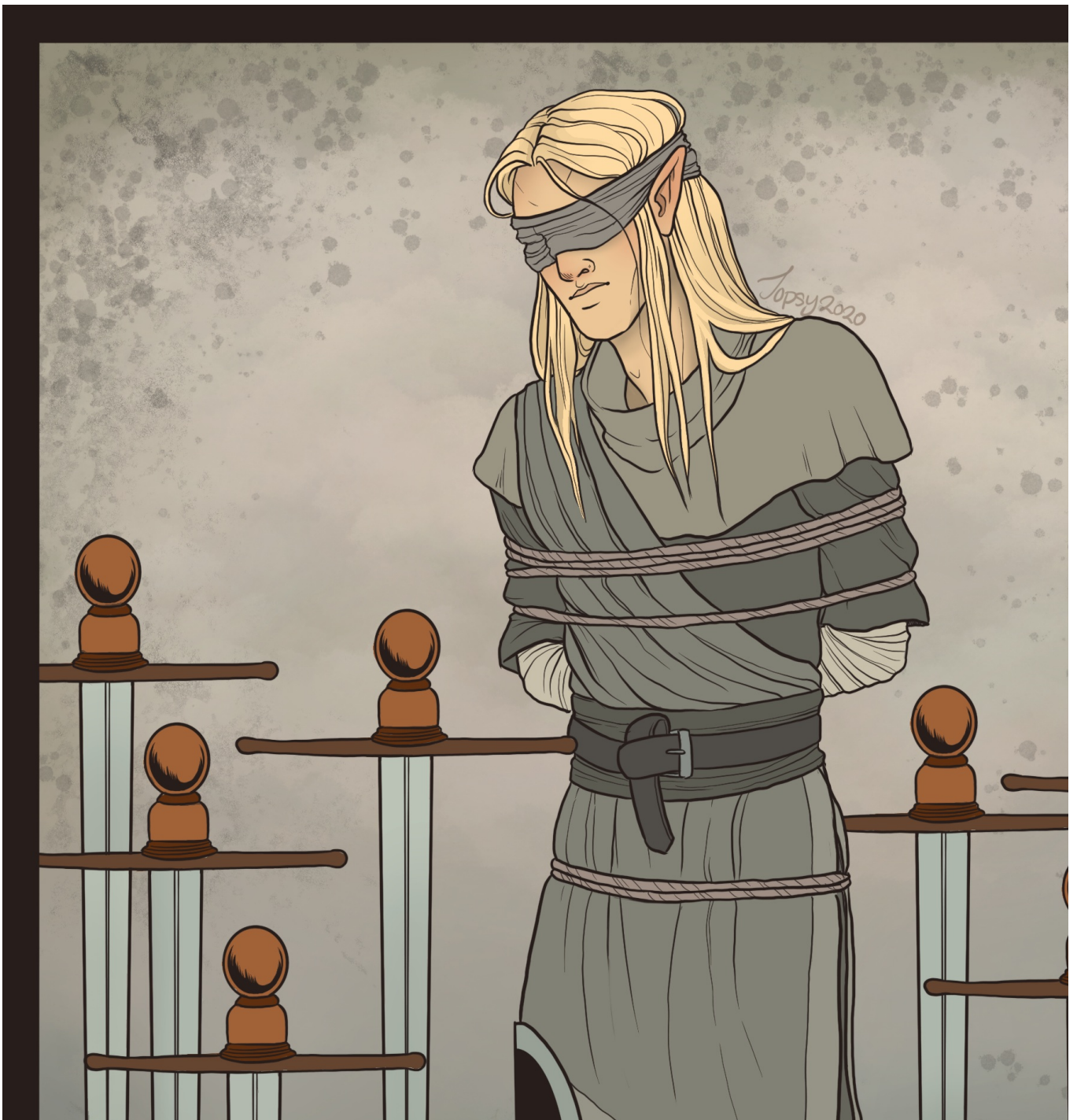
## Chapter Notes

Thanks again, deludedwriting, for giving this chapter the initial once-over!

I know, the chapter artwork is *so comforting*...

[CW: Mild violence.]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)





The sun was just beginning to peek around the Throat of the World when Nilandur left Whiterun. The ground was still hardened from the night's frost, the grass and gravel dusted with white crystals that sparkled as they caught the first rays of morning light. His horse, Mara, was alert and perkier than usual, with both ears facing forward. She held her head high as they passed Pelagia Farm, nickering softly and swishing her tail. Chickens clucked and flapped their wings as they dashed along the road, making Nilandur smile. The sky was a deep, azure blue, dappled with soft white clouds.

It was a perfect day.

---

Nil had risen before the sun and immediately packed his things, giddy with excitement. He'd tidied, swept, and taken one last look at his little flat before closing and locking the door. Aerik had appeared confused when Nil turned up on their doorstep just after sunrise. His hair was pulled into a messy bun, his eyes still swollen from sleep.

"Dad?"

"I'm sorry, dear. Did I wake you?"

"Nah." Aerik let himself be pulled into a hug, squeezing Nil too tightly around the middle like he always did. "Just got up. Come on in. Why are you all packed?"

Aerik seemed to agree with Teldryn's sentiment from the night before. The three of them sat around the kitchen table, sharing a small breakfast of sliced apples with cheese.

"Listen, I'm not saying that you can't take care of yourself. You're a grown-ass man. And a great mage." Aerik scratched at his beard, brow creased as he hunched over the table. "But I just... Skyrim is dangerous." He sighed. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"I promise I'll be careful. It's not as though I haven't traveled before."

"Yeah, but, alone?" Aerik leaned on one elbow, mouth smushed against his fist. He glanced sideways at Teldryn, who had a hand on his back. "I just have one of my feelings."

"Feelings?" Nil asked.

"Aerik tends to..." Teldryn drummed the fingers of his other hand against the table, seeming to search for the right words. "Trust his gut, so to speak. Premonitions. He's usually correct."

"Aerik." Nilandur reached across the table, taking one of his son's hands into his own. "Simply the fact that you care about my wellbeing means everything to me. But please, trust me. If I stay here even a day longer..."

"Is this because of Ulfric?" Aerik very nearly growled, sitting up straighter. "Because I swear on Malacath's fucking toenails, if he did something to you—"

"No!" Nilandur's face and ears flooded with warmth. "No, no, absolutely not." He laughed nervously, patting Aerik's hand twice before releasing it. "This has been building for quite a while. I just..." He trailed off, having run out of things to say. Aerik looked to Teldryn again, who simply rubbed his hand along his back in response. With a heavy sigh, Aerik stretched his arms up over his head, twisting and groaning into a stretch.

"Fine. But you better write."

"Of course!" Nilandur agreed emphatically.

"And if I don't hear from you within a month, I'm coming to find you myself."

---

Nilandur stopped at the river to let Mara have a drink. He looked between the two bridges, determining which direction to go. He didn't really have a plan, but he wanted to at least try to make it into another hold before sundown. Mara raised her head and looked at something off in the distance, ear twitching, before she ducked back down to drink again. Nil smoothed a hand down her broad neck, absently rearranging her mane. He'd managed to avoid Ulfric, which he felt mildly guilty about. It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to see Ulfric one last time, more so that Nilandur didn't want to be reminded that he was merely a shameful indulgence for the High King – something to be hidden away, kept secret.

Once Mara had finished drinking, Nil swung back up into his saddle and headed north. He knew the other direction would eventually lead him to Riften, and, from what he knew of the city, it was a place he wished to avoid. He squeezed his heels gently against Mara's sides and she picked up into a trot. The Whiterun plains were usually teeming with sabercats, though they generally tended to avoid the roads. Still, Nil didn't want to take any chances, and would rather Mara be warmed up and ready to run than to be caught off guard. He mentally congratulated himself for taking the proper precautions; Aerik would be proud.

After about an hour into the ride, the landscape began to shift — the plains became more rocky, the grass darker and dotted with patches of snow. The Pale stretched before him, massive pine trees stretching towards the heavens like obelisks. Mara snorted and tossed her head, prompting Nil to give her a soothing pat.

"You're alright, my dear."

It was beginning to snow; soft downy flakes spiraling silently towards the earth. Nilandur pulled his cloak up higher around his neck, casting a small warming spell on himself and Mara for good measure. Mara tossed her head again, letting out a hoarse whinny. Nilandur frowned, continuing to pat her neck. "What's gotten into you?" He squinted, trying to peer through the snow to see what could be upsetting her. Just up the road, there appeared to be a small pile of clothing discarded alongside the path. He ran a hand along Mara's neck with a smile. "Nothing to be afraid of." As they drew closer, however, Nilandur noticed something odd about the clothes: two small feet poked out from beneath them, bare, and ashen white.

"Merciful heavens..." He swung out of the saddle, dashing over to the crumpled figure with panic rising in his chest. It was a child, swaddled in rags and nothing else. Their face was startlingly blue, eyes flickering open sluggishly as Nilandur pushed a bit of hair out of their face.

"Stay with me, please, stay with me..." Healing magicka was already pulsing in his hand as he pressed it to their small torso. The child groaned and Nilandur's throat tightened, frantically sending silent prayers to any god that might be listening. He reached up to wipe a bit of snow from the child's cheek, and... The bluish tone of their skin smeared. Like paint.

"What...?" He locked eyes with the child.

They gave him a rueful smile before their gaze landed on something just over his shoulder. Before Nil could even turn around, pain erupted like a thundercrack at the back of his head, and everything went black.

---

The world slowly began to reform: colors and shapes and sensations. Nilandur groaned, his fingers and toes stiff, completely numb from the cold. His head was pounding; there was a stabbing pain behind his eyes, sharp and bright, as if two ice picks had been driven into his skull. He sat up, slowly rubbing the back of his head, struggling to recall where he was or why he was outside. He felt wetness against his fingertips and inspected his hand. Blood. He had been attacked. The child.

He looked up suddenly, the pain in his head doubling at the sharp movement.

“Mara?”

Panic. Complete and utter terror flooded his body, gathering like bile in the back of his throat. He pushed to his feet, ignoring the pain as he spun in a circle, looking around with wild desperation.

“MARA!?”

Silence. The fresh snowfall had covered any tracks that may have been visible. With as much strength as he had left, Nilandur pulled his magicka towards him, reaching deep into the Weave. With a yell, he released his spell, magicka flooding outwards like a tidal wave, washing through the forest, lapping against tree trunks. He held his breath, eyes scanning the horizon. A pair of rabbits. Three frostbite spiders in the distance. A large deer. Nilandur wheezed, dropping to his knees and clutching his chest. She was gone. He couldn't breathe. She'd been stolen. He couldn't breathe. This was all his fault. A choking sob managed to claw its way out of his tightened throat, his vision blurring as hot tears rolled down his cheeks. His pack was gone, too. All of his supplies, all of his money. Gone. And Mara.... His sweet, docile Mara. His other possessions could be replaced, and gold could be earned again... But Mara? Nilandur covered his mouth and eyes, doubled over and shaking uncontrollably as he let himself cry, alone in the snowy forest.

He wasn't sure how much time passed. His tears had long run dry and the cold eventually became too much to bear. Somehow he managed to get to his feet, rivulets of tears frozen against his cheeks. The pain in his head had become oppressive, and at last he called upon a healing spell. He felt the wound on the back of his skull sealing shut, becoming nothing more than an itchy scab. The pounding throb behind his eyes lessened to a dull ache. Standing in the middle of the road, Nilandur was at an utter loss of what to do. He turned to look behind him, the way from which he'd come. He could return to Whiterun... At the very least, he could probably make it to the outer farms by sundown. How pathetic he would look, robbed of everything when his self-appointed adventure had barely begun, forced to drag himself back home, tail tucked between his legs? The thieves hadn't taken his coat at least. He could walk... Nilandur shook his head, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms and sniffing loudly. He'd be walking into certain death; nothing more than a frozen corpse by morning. Perhaps he'd be better off...

“No,” he said aloud, voice raw and small in the quiet of the snowy forest. He wrapped a hand protectively around his left wrist, an old habit. He wouldn't let himself go down that path of thought. Not here, not now. Squaring his shoulders, he marched forward down the road, away from Whiterun. He wasn't sure of his plan yet, he just wanted to look for clues, or tracks. Anything. Eventually he came across his pack, thoroughly rummaged through by the thieves. His belongings were tossed about, strewn across the snow banks that lined the road, but a good deal of them were still intact, including his bed roll. A small spark of hope lit in his belly as he scooped his scattered things out of the snow and shoved them back into his pack. He'd stop to take inventory of everything soon, but not yet. For now, he needed to find shelter.

With his belongings re-secured, Nilandur set off down the path, willing himself to keep putting one foot in front of the other. He became lost in his own thoughts and anxieties, hypnotized by the rhythm of his own gait, and nearly missed signpost up ahead. He startled, taking a step back and looking up at the worn, crooked arrows. Whiterun: pointing the way he'd just come. Dawnstar: the name weathered and faded, pointing off to his left. And... Nilandur's heart clenched. Windhelm: pointing to the right.

Palace of the Kings. Roaring hearthfires. A warm bed. Maybe this was a sign from the Divines, to stop being stubborn – to see the gift that Ulfric was trying to give him. His mind revolted against the idea so violently that Nilandur physically shuddered. No. Definitely not a sign from the Gods. He looked back up at the signpost. To Dawnstar, then. It had a lovely name, full of light and hope. A new start awaited him there. Adjusting the straps of his pack, Nilandur took the path to his left, pointedly refusing to look over his shoulder.

He found a small abandoned shack a few hours before sundown and decided to set up camp. The roof was half caved in, but one of the rooms was still intact and mostly sheltered him from the elements. There was an old trunk inside with a broken lock, containing two gold pieces and some musty animal furs. He quickly pocketed the gold and used the furs to pad his bedroll for extra warmth. He picked around the collapsed roof, gathering small bits of snow-wet wood and managed to coax to life a small fire in a rusted cauldron. He could have used arcane fire easily, but he found that food cooked over magical flames tended to have an odd taste. Most of his better food had been stolen, but there were a few potatoes still left, so he attempted to roast one. It was still raw in the middle and he burnt his tongue when he bit into it. With his stomach growling angrily, Nilandur crawled into his bedroll, shivering. He cast a small spell to warm himself, pulling the stinking furs up around him as much as he could stand. His mind churned, thoughts wandering back to Mara. She must be so frightened and confused. What if they were treating her badly? What if they simply killed her for meat? Nilandur sniffed and rubbed at his eyes, determined not to let himself cry anymore, lest he feel even more pathetic than he already did. With his eyes forced shut, he took slow, calming breaths, the cold stinging his nostrils and burning his throat. Finally, his mind stilled and he drifted off into a light, fitful sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

:')

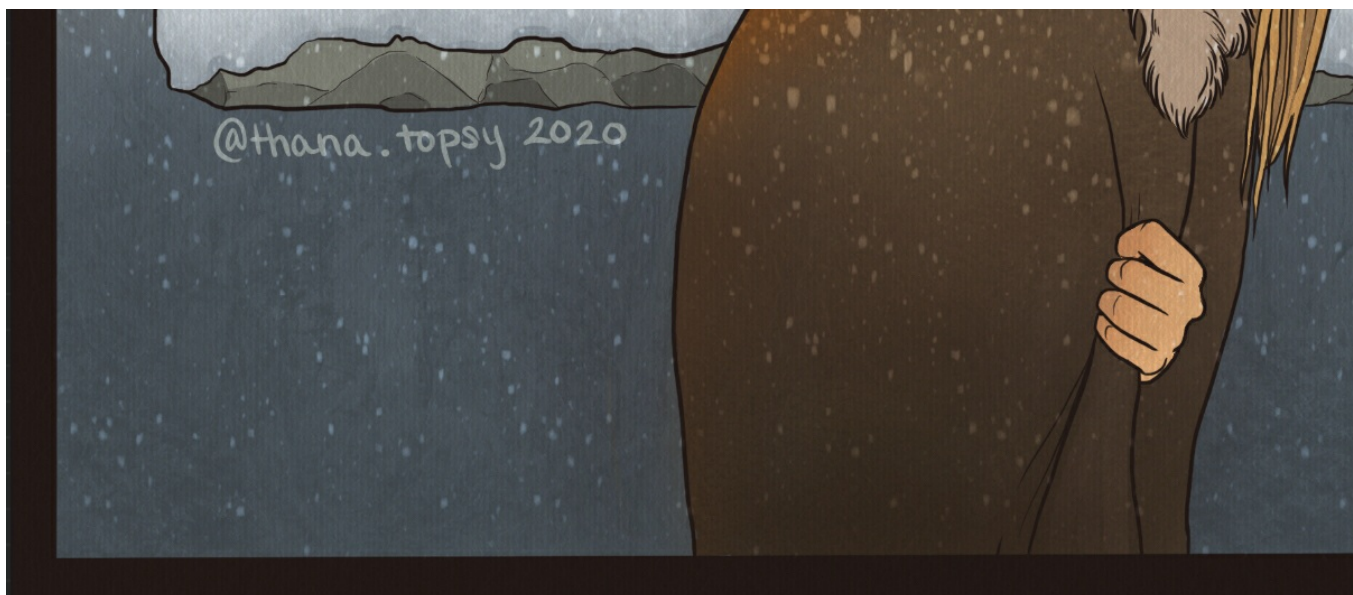


# Dawnstar

## Chapter Notes

Thanks to FourCatProduction for kicking this chapter into shape!





As it turned out, Dawnstar was a shabby little miners town, perched on the shallow banks of a soggy inlet.

Nilandur sighed, his shoulders sagging with disappointment as the wind pressed at his back, as if urging him onward. Clenching his jaw, he continued forward, bowing his head as he passed a patrol of guards. They paid him no mind, as if he were invisible. Reaching into his pocket, he thumbed across the two gold coins, wondering if they would be able to buy him anything at all. Maybe another potato. First things first: he had to figure out a way to make money.

“Excuse me.” Nil approached one of the passing guards. They ignored him, continuing on their patrol. He watched them go in a baffled silence, wondering if he actually *was* invisible. Worrying his lower lip, he scanned the rest of the town before spotting a man with a pickaxe over his shoulder, heading out towards the coastline. He skittered over.

“Excuse me,” he tried a bit louder this time. The man, a Nord, turned to look at him, giving him a once-over with a quirked brow.

“What is it, elf?”

Nil smiled warily. “I’m looking for work – do you possibly know of anyone hiring?”

“Work?” The man looked him up and down again. “No work for the likes of you.”

“Please,” Nil pressed. “I’m really quite desperate.” He laughed at his own expense, fiddling with the straps of his pack. The man gave him a thoughtful look, twisting the handle of his pickaxe, the pick and chisel spinning hypnotically over his shoulder.

“Iron-Breaker Mine is always hiring. Speak to Beitild. Nord woman with the mean eyes. She’ll turn you down at first, I’m sure, but she’s just as desperate as you.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me just yet.” The man let out a growling noise that might have been a laugh before



going on his way.

*Beitild, Beitild...* Nilandur chanted the name in his head like a prayer, trotting further into town. Sure enough, there was a woman working the smelter just outside of what Nil assumed to be Iron-Breaker Mine. Her eyes weren't nearly as mean as he was expecting.

"Excuse me, are you Beitild? I was sent to speak to you. I'm looking for work."

The woman paused in her coal shoveling, staking the end of the shovel into the ground and leaning on it as she turned to look at him. Her grim expression cracked into a disbelieving smile and she laughed, though there was little mirth in the sound. "*You* want to work in *my* mine?"

"I'd like to try—"

"No." Beitild pulled the shovel from the ground and turned back to the smelter. "I need men and women who can actually lift a pickaxe. You look like you could barely lift a soup spoon."

"Perhaps you need assistance with something other than mining—"

"Listen, elf." She staked her shovel into the ground again. "I own this mine, and we make twice as much coin as those horkers over at Quicksilver. I can't have you slowing us down or getting in my miners' way. They're already dumb enough as it is."

"Please," Nilandur implored. "Just let me try."

Beitild gave him a long, hard look, silence stretching between the two of them for a troubling length of time. At last, she let out a tremendous sigh and stepped away from the smelter, stooping to grab a rusted pickaxe from a nearby trough.

"You don't get paid by the hour, you get paid by how much iron you can dig up. I'll pay you extra if you smelt it for me."

Nilandur took the pickaxe, grinning from ear-to-ear. "Thank you so very much. You have no idea—"

"Just get to work."

Nilandur realized very quickly that he'd never truly done hard labor before, nor did he know where to begin. He wandered through the mine for a good twenty minutes, watching the other miners work, inspecting their technique, learning to properly identify iron ore veins... Finally, he found a vein of his own. He widened his stance, mimicking what he'd seen, hefted the pickaxe over his shoulder, and swung. The vibrations of the metal hitting solid rock traveled up his arms and into his jaw, making his teeth click together painfully. He stumbled backwards, slightly dizzy. Well. That wasn't what he'd expected. He tried again, this time bracing for the impact. After about fifteen minutes of chipping, Nilandur was finally able to extricate a small lump of iron from the hard rock and soil. And it was *small* ; only about the size of the palm of his hand. He sighed, setting it aside, and got back to work.

Four hours later, Nilandur emerged from the mine, not because he felt he'd procured enough iron, but because his hands were too blistered and bleeding to continue working. His back ached terribly, and his ears were ringing from the constant, grating rhythm of metal hitting rock. Beitild looked at

his box of pathetic iron ore bits with her mouth pressed into a grim line.

“I can give you about twenty septims for this. I could make it thirty if you smelted it.”

“I’m not sure how to use the smelter, otherwise I would...” It was a shameful confession.

“Very well.” She handed him twenty gold pieces and Nilandur thanked her, walking away with his head down. This, at least, would get him a room for the night, and possibly a hot meal.

The Windpeak Inn was blessedly warm, and Nilandur’s frozen, blistered hands stung as they began to thaw, like one hundred invisible ants marching across his skin. He adjusted his pack and shuffled over to the counter.

“I’d like to rent a room, please.”

The innkeep looked him up and down, as everyone in Dawnstar seemed to do. “Ten gold for a full day – if you stay longer, just give me ten more gold around this time tomorrow evening.”

“Alright.” Nilandur pulled the gold from his pocket. “And what might you have by way of hot food?” Meat, meat, and more meat. Nilandur should have expected as much. In the end he bought half a loaf of bread, a small chunk of cheese, and another potato. This left him with the two coins he’d found in the old trunk from the night before. He smiled wearily, pocketing them again. They were his lucky coins, it seemed.

He meandered over to the center hearth, tearing off chunks of bread and sprinkling crumbs of cheese on top, placing them close enough to the fire to melt. He situated the potato just off to the side of the coals to roast before pulling up a chair and sitting down with a groan. His entire body ached in a way he hadn’t experienced before. He took a moment to inspect his hands, running a thumb over the blisters and splits. Of course, healing them was not a problem. He knew myriad spells that would seal the skin right up. They would even ease the ache in his muscles and joints. So why hadn’t he implemented them? He rested his hands gingerly in his lap, sighing and leaning his head back against the chair. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Teldryn had called him a masochist before. He was starting to believe it.

“May I help you with that, my child?”

Nilandur sluggishly re-opened his eyes, wondering if the speaker was addressing him or not. A Dunmer stood next to his chair, swathed in similar robes to Danica Pure-Spring, an amulet of Mara hanging from his neck.

“I’m sorry, were you speaking to me?” *Surely not.*

“I was.” The Dunmer motioned to his hands. “I can heal you, if you’d like.”

Nilandur suddenly felt very foolish. “Oh.” He let out a small laugh. “Oh, no, that’s...” But what did he say? *Oh, it’s fine. I can heal myself, I just prefer to wallow in my own pain.* “Thank you, that would be very much appreciated, but I... I’m sorry, I can’t pay you.”

“No payment necessary.” The Dunmer knelt beside his chair with a soft smile, taking one of Nilandur’s hands into his own. “You looked like you could use a bit of kindness.”

Nilandur wanted to cry. He laughed instead. “Very insightful of you.”

“Were you in the mines?” the Dunmer asked, his face now hidden behind his hood as he bent low over Nilandur’s hands. “Doesn’t seem like the type of place for someone like you.”

“I’m starting to wonder if *any* place is the type of place for someone like me.” Nil chuckled, sucking in a breath as the Restoration magic began to take effect. He couldn’t help the little groan that slipped out, and immediately covered his mouth in the crook of his free arm. “I’m sorry.”

“I believe that’s the third time you’ve said you were sorry to me.” The Dunmer looked up, his red eyes catching the firelight. There was pity in the look. Nilandur knew it well. “What’s your name, child?”

He paused for a beat, momentarily thrown off by being referred to as a child again. “Nilandur.”

The Dunmer didn’t laugh so much as let out a few small huffs through his nose. “A lovely name. It means ‘tender of gardens’, right?”

Nil blinked. “I... suppose it does.” The comment caught him off-guard. “Though I think if you did a crude, direct translation, it means ‘flower guardian’,” he added, vaguely dazed. This was one of the strangest dark elves he’d ever met. And that was including Teldryn. “How did you know?”

“Because my name is very similar.” He looked up again, the barest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Erاندur. ‘Tender of the flame.’ Priest of Mara.”

“Erандur...” Nilandur repeated, watching the last of his blisters flatten and fade beneath the golden glow of the healing spell. The ache in his muscles had also abated. “What brings you to Dawnstar, Erандur, Priest of Mara?”

“I used to live here.” Erандur’s voice was a bit tight. “Decided it was high time I came back.” He released Nilandur’s hands and pushed to his feet with a groan and an audible pop in his joints.

“So you have a house here in town?”

“No, not at all. I’m setting up a small shrine to Mara in Nightcaller Temple. It’s just up the hill. I’ll most likely be staying up there.”

“By yourself?” Nilandur ran his thumb across his palms, massaging the center of his hands. They felt like new.

“For the time, yes. I don’t mind. It is...” He seemed to cut himself off, a distant look passing over his eyes like a stormcloud. “Well, my intention is to eventually set up a proper Temple to Mara there, not just a shrine. The Pale could use it.”

“I hear there’s a Temple of Mara in Riften. Have you been?”

“Afraid not. Unfortunately I’ve done more traveling outside of Skyrim than in it.”

“Ah.” Nilandur fiddled with his dirty robes. Oh, heavens, he was filthy. How he must look to an outsider. No wonder he attracted the pity of a priest. “Traveling through Skyrim. I intend to do that. Well, intended. My journey has... not really gone according to plan so far.” He laughed sadly. “That’s how I ended up here.”

“Well, I’m glad that our paths were able to cross, then.” Erандur offered him a soft smile, which Nilandur couldn’t help but return. The warmth of the interaction rolled like a sunkiss across Nil’s skin; a radiant heat that rippled through his chest. Or perhaps it was simply the lingering effects of the healing spell.

“Oh!” Nil sprung to his feet, startling Erandur slightly. “My potato!” Without a second thought, he reached out with his magicka and plucked the potato from the coals using a simple telekinesis spell, setting it down gently on the stone edge of the hearthfire. He poked and prodded at the slightly blackened skin, hissing and shaking his fingers.

“Well,” Erandur chuckled. “You seem quite skilled in magic.”

Nil gave him a sheepish smile. “I was going to heal myself. Eventually. I think...”

“I was happy to assist, regardless.” He gave a small bow. “I must return to the temple, but perhaps our paths will cross again.”

“Ah, yes. That would be... I... It was so lovely to meet you,” Nil stammered, offering his hand. Erandur covered it with both of his.

“Be kind to yourself, Nilandur.” And with that, he left. Nil watched him go with an odd sense of melancholy swirling in the pit of his stomach. Was he unkind to himself?

His potato was burnt on the outside, but perfectly cooked otherwise. The Inn’s owner even gave him a small pinch of salt and three stringy carrots that were too small to sell. The charity of the evening left Nilandur’s heart fuller than he’d thought possible, given the circumstances, and he even caught himself humming a bit as he went outside to fill his waterskin. The clouds had cleared and the borealis shimmered across the sky, bathing the world in a soft wash of color. Kneeling by the water’s edge, Nil looked over his shoulder, eyes trailing up the large hill to the southeast of town. Alone at the top sat an old, dilapidated temple. Surely that wasn’t where Erandur was staying. By himself. In the cold. Nilandur’s heart ached at the thought. *Be kind to yourself*. Perhaps the priest should take his own advice.

Feeling a bit more optimistic about his journey, Nil settled into his room. He refused to think about Mara for too long, which thus far had only served to double down on the guilt pressing in on him from all sides. He washed his hands in the small basin in the corner, the pitcher water ice cold, making the joints of his fingers ache. He used his magicka more liberally, no longer worried about overextending himself, warming the room and himself just enough to feel comfortable. Sliding beneath the fur covers, Nilandur took one last look around before closing his eyes. The bed felt luxurious compared to the night before, and he did his best not to immediately fret about acquiring more money. Auri-El would provide. He might even have Mara on his side, now... His heart tugged painfully at the thought of his horse, and he rolled over, pulling the blankets up to his ears and willing himself to sleep.

Unfortunately, sleep did not come easily. Nilandur tossed and turned, first too hot, then too cold. He seemed to lay awake for hours, his thoughts churning inside his head; a ship in a seastorm. Finally, he felt the waves of his mind begin to settle, his awareness beginning to drift, only to snap back awake with alarm. He could have sworn he just saw something out of the corner of his eye. Something in his room. Moving. He sat up, immediately casting Magelight and aiming it towards the darkened corner across from his bed. The spell glided silently through the air, stopping as it hit the far wall.

There, in the darkness, a figure stood inspecting the bookcase.



“Excuse me?” Nilandur asked. His voice was too small in the quiet.

The figure turned around, a book in her hand, and gave Nil an all-too-familiar lopsided smile. His heart nearly stopped.

“Hey there handsome,” Brea greeted with a wink. “It’s past your bedtime.”

“You’re dead.” The words left Nilandur’s lips before he could stop them, and he clamped a hand over his mouth, scooting away until his back was pressed against the headboard, eyes wide.

Brea shrugged, turning her attention back to the book. “Too right.”

Nilandur swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. “Am... Am I being haunted?”

“It would seem so.” She snapped the book closed returning it to the shelf. “Unless this is a normal occurrence for you. Speaking to the dead, that is.” She smiled again, placing her hands atop the shelf and hoisting herself up to sit atop it. “How’s my boy doing?”

Nil blinked. “Aerik?”

“That’s the one.” Brea winked again. “The one and only.”

“He’s... fine. He’s doing really well.” Nilandur twisted the sheets between his fingers. “Why is this happening?”

“Well, apparently you had something you wanted to talk about.” Brea swung her feet back and forth and it was only then that Nilandur realized she wasn’t wearing shoes. Her feet looked nearly black with dirt. “So let it all out.”

“I’m sorry,” he blurted.

She laughed, shaking her head. “Nilly... Are you really apologizing to a ghost?”

“I didn’t know... I...” He swallowed again. “I would have stayed, you know. Had I known—”

“But you didn’t,” Brea interrupted, swinging her legs out and hopping down from atop the book shelf, striding over to him. “And now you’re all alone. Again. Looking for forgiveness from someone who can’t give it.”

She was almost to the bed and Nilandur felt faint. “Can’t you give it?”

“Silly Nilly.” She was right beside him now. “My nervous Nil.” She swung her leg up onto the bed, hiking up her skirt to straddle his hips. She took his face in her hands, her fingers icy cold. “You haven’t changed much, have you?”

“I always disliked those nicknames.” He was surprised at the huskiness of his own voice, allowing his hands to trail along her thighs, beneath her skirt. Cold as death, everywhere he touched.

“I know.” She smiled. “S’why I called you by them.”

Nilandur laughed, closing his eyes, letting his hands continue to run along her smooth thighs. “I miss you.”

“I’m sure you do,” she teased, biting her lower lip. “But you’re a cocksucker now, huh?”

Nil’s face went cold, his hands freezing in their path. “W-what?”

“A cocksucker,” Brea repeated, her tone light and teasing. She took a strand of Nilandur’s hair and twirled it around her finger playfully. “Pretty soon you’ll be bending over and taking it, right?”

“What... Why are you saying this?”

“I’m not the one saying it, Nilandur.” Her eyes had gone dark, black as ebony. “You’re the one talking to your own imagination.”

The room seemed to pulse and shift around him, the angles of the walls and doors warping, skewing sideways. Brea’s face distorted into something hideous and deformed, her lips pulling back into a too-wide smile with too many teeth, sharp and stained at the gums. Nilandur was on his back, paralyzed. Her fingers... Her *claws* dug into his shoulders, pressing him down into the mattress as it formed around his back, sinking lower, sucking him in.

“You’re better off *dead* and you know it.” Her voice was no longer her own, but something dark and demented. Hot, sticky saliva dripped from rows and rows of pointed teeth, globbing onto his cheeks. “But you’re too much of a coward to even off yourself properly, aren’t you?”

Nilandur’s voice was gone, lost. His mouth opened and closed, but no words came out as the bed continued to sink around him, pressing in on all sides. Suffocating him. The monster unhinged its jaw, revealing an esophagus lined with more teeth, pulsing, flexing, moving closer to his face—

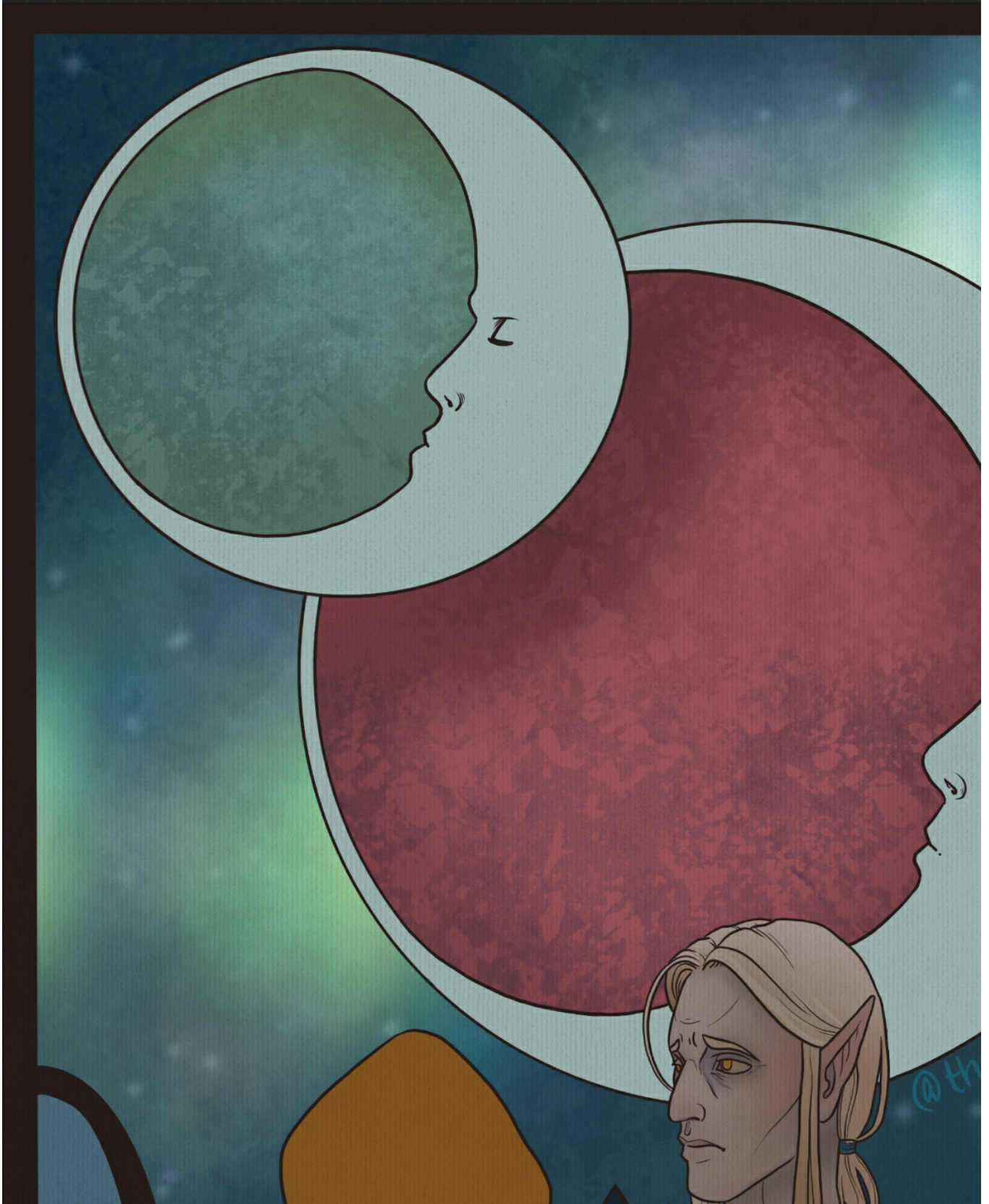
Nilandur bolted upright with a strangled scream, clapping his hands over his mouth.

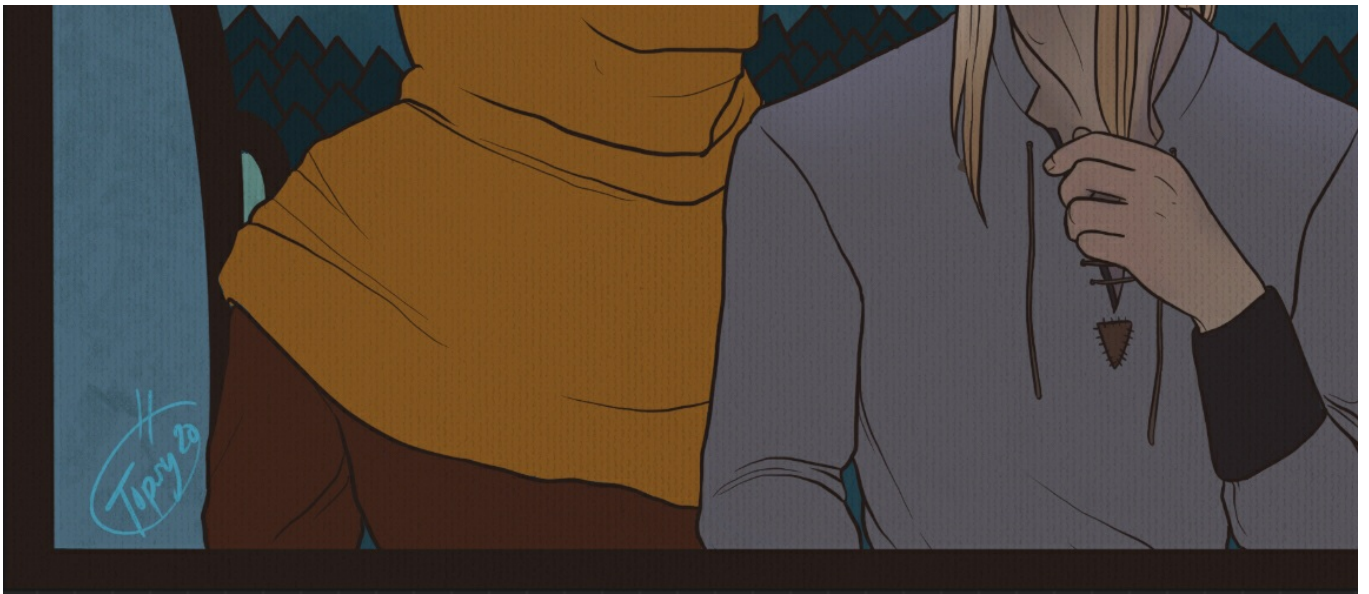
His room was empty and cold, the pale light of the approaching dawn just beginning to seep through the small window at the top of the wall. His sides heaved as he tried to catch his breath, his shirt completely drenched with sweat. His hair clung to his forehead and neck, damp and clammy. He fell back against his pillow, staring up at the ceiling with wide eyes. Slowly, he let his hands fall from his mouth as he sucked in a rattling sob, curled onto his side, and openly wept into his pillow. He lay there until he heard the distant cries of roosters and muffled movement outside his door as the Inn’s other patrons awoke. Still shaking, Nilandur pulled himself from his bed and began to dress for the day.

# Waking Nightmare

## Chapter Notes

Thanks again to DeludedWriting and FourCatProductions for being my betas!





## CHAPTER FIVE

Despite being sleep deprived, Nilandur's second day in Ironbreaker Mine wasn't nearly as bad as the first. The blisters from his hands had healed nicely thanks to the priest's spell, leaving small calluses behind. He even learned to use the smelter, which doubled his pay. Exhausted, but satisfied, he returned to the Windpeak Inn well before sundown and was able to purchase a full, hot meal, as well as rent his room for another night. As he stirred the cooking pot, his eyes scanned the room in hopes of seeing the priest from the night prior, and were disappointed to find him absent. He did notice, however, that the other patrons seemed to be just as exhausted as he was. Peculiar. Satisfied with his vegetable stew, he ladled the contents into a wooden bowl and sat down at one of the tables to eat in silence, dripping a chunk of bread greedily into the broth and licking the remnants from his fingers. He became full almost too fast and had to slow down, sitting back with a sigh.

He hadn't allowed himself to think about his dream from the night before. Nightmare, he corrected. There had been a time in his life when he'd had nightmares almost every single night for almost a month straight. But never like that. Never so disturbing or so very... *specific*. He shook his head, pushing the memory away, blaming it on stress. Tonight, at least, he had a full stomach and the security of coin in his pocket. He'd head back into the mines again tomorrow, maybe work a few more days until he had a comfortable amount of gold, and then...

Nilandur rubbed at his eyes. *Then, what?* What was he doing? Biding his time? He didn't have a plan. He'd barely had one when he set out from Whiterun. Hopelessness washed over him and he slouched forward, resting his head in his hand as he stirred his stew morosely. He'd just have to take it one day at a time, he decided. He'd return to the mines tomorrow, or even try to find a different form of work in town. Maybe with the local apothecary. There was plenty of adventure for him to look forward to.

After finishing up the last of his dinner, Nil retreated to his room, allowing himself to feel mildly optimistic. He inspected the bookshelf by the door, deciding that perhaps a bit of light reading before bed might stave off any possible nightmares. The image of Brea sitting atop the shelf rippled to life in his mind's eyes, and he quickly grabbed a random book and shuffled over to his

bed. Settling beneath the covers, he set the book down on his lap and ran his hand across the worn cover: *16 Accords of Madness v. IX*. Not his first choice of reading material, but it would have to do.

*He had no idea what he was running from or towards, but he didn't care. The desire saturated his mind — there was nothing in the world except flight. He looked around for landmarks, anything to place himself or to use as a target, but to no avail — the featureless grasslands through which he was sprinting extended as far as the eye could see. "Just have to keep running", he thought to himself. "I have to run as fast as I can". On and on he ran, with no end in sight or in mind....*

Nilandur swallowed, a cold sweat forming on his brow and along the back of his neck. That didn't bode well. He should probably put the book down and find something more pleasant to read. His eyes meandered curiously to the next paragraph:

*Standing over Darius Shano while he lay quietly in his bed were his mistress, Vaermina the Dreamweaver, and the Mad God Sheogorath. Vaermina looked down with pride at this disciple of hers, and was boastful of her little jewel.*

Nilandur snapped the book closed and tossed it onto the floor away from his bed. Yes, that was enough of that book for tonight. He'd select his titles more carefully in the future. With a huff and a grunt, Nilandur shifted onto his side, pulling the covers up around him and settling down against the mattress. By some miracle, he fell asleep almost instantly.

He awoke screaming two hours later.

----

Mining was getting easier with each passing day, though the lack of sleep was beginning to wear at the corners of Nilandur's mind. He'd find himself drifting off standing up, or he'd take a short break and sit down in one of the rickety chairs, only to snap awake with no memory of having fallen asleep. Even during the day, the nightmares plagued him to the point that he was afraid to blink. On the second night, his tormenter had been his father: towering above him, back always turned, never showing his face. When he had finally turned around, Nilandur had been confronted with his own rotting reflection. The third night was Aerik: he was injured, screaming for Nilandur's help, but Nil couldn't find him. He ran, panicked, through long, spiraling passageways, ribbed like the inside of a throat, Aerik's cries echoing off the damp walls. The fourth night was Ulfric...

Nilandur snapped awake at the sound of a pickaxe striking stone, righting himself in the chair. He



pushed to standing with a hiss and a groan, bending to retrieve his crate of raw ore. He had enough to smelt several bars, probably worth sixty septims if he did it well. It was good enough for today. He'd hurt himself if he continued to try to work while he was this sleep-deprived. He hefted the crate up onto his shoulder and left the mine.

At the smelter, Beitild gave Nil a less-than-obvious once-over. "You haven't been sleeping much either, huh?"

Nilandur paused in his shoveling. "Either?" he asked, and he couldn't help but notice the dark circles beneath her eyes as well.

"Nightmares?"

Nil's face went cold. "How...?"

"I'm having them, too. So is Bodil and Karl. And something tells me we aren't the only ones." She looked around, and Nil followed her gaze. Even the guards seemed sluggish in their patrols, one tripping over a loose stone in the path, stumbling to catch himself.

"I'm..." Nilandur swallowed and laughed a little. "I'm honestly so relieved it isn't just me."

"I think we're cursed," Beitild grunted. "The gods are angry with us."

Nilandur certainly hoped that wasn't the case.

He finished smelting his iron and collected the coin from Beitild before wearily trudging back to the inn. It was only a few hours past high noon, and Nilandur was at a loss. He couldn't sleep — or rather, he didn't want to. He pushed through the Windpeak's front doors, still debating what he might do with the rest of his day, when he spotted a familiar figure near the hearth.

"Erandur," Nilandur greeted with a tired smile as he approached him. "I hope you've been well."

The priest looked up, also sporting dark rings beneath his eyes, even for a Dunmer. He offered Nilandur a sad smile in return, averting his gaze. "I'm sorry to see that this has been affecting you as well."

Nilandur raised a brow. "Pardon?"

"The nightmares." Erandur adjusted his hood, pulling it down further over his face. "I'm afraid they're my fault."

"Your...?" Nilandur let out a tittering laugh. "How on Nirn could they be your fault?"

"I..." He saw Erandur swallow, his gaze flickering nervously around the room. He moved closer to Nilandur, lowering his voice. "Will you help me?"

"Me? Help you? How?"

"You're skilled with magic. I saw it. Nobody else in this town will be of any use... But, I think I can stop the nightmares. I just need help. I — " He cut himself off again, shaking his head. "I've already said too much."

"You've barely said anything at all," Nilandur argued. "Please, what's this all about?"

“Will you help me?” Erandur repeated.

“I’ll help you if you let me know what it is you need help with!” Nilandur wasn’t usually so short-tempered, but the lack of sleep was gnawing away at him, and Erandur’s obtuseness wasn’t helping the matter.

“Meet me at Nightcaller Temple.” Erandur pushed past him, placing a warm hand on his shoulder. “I’ll explain everything there.”

Nilandur huffed, pursing his lips as he watched Erandur leave. He returned to his room, changing out of his miners clothes and into something a bit warmer. He debated bringing a pack, but decided against it, securing his belongings in the trunk at the end of the bed. Surely whatever Erandur needed help with wouldn’t take too long.

Three hours later, Nilandur found himself standing before a massive altar to the Daedric Prince, Vaermina. Clutching a bloody mace to his chest and shaking uncontrollably, he watched Erandur begin an invocation to Mother Mara. To say that he was overwhelmed by the situation would have been an egregious simplification. First and foremost, Erandur hadn’t been completely forthright about his involvement with Nightcaller Temple, or his reasons for leaving Dawnstar, much less returning to it. In his defence however, had Nilandur been in the same position, he’d also have been reluctant to admit to being an ex-cultist of Vaermina...

*He lied to you*, a small voice in the back of his mind insisted. *Who’s to say he isn’t still lying to you?*

Nilandur swallowed, clutching the mace a little tighter.

*He may not even be a priest of Mara... still working in the service of Vaermina, about to unleash the torpor instead of stopping it — he’ll cast an eternal shadow across Skyrim, trapping the citizens in their nightmares.* Nilandur sucked in a breath, taking a step forward. He couldn’t allow such a thing to happen. Not after everything he’d seen.

*Strike him down, before he can unleash Vaermina’s full wrath.*

But Erandur had been so kind to him; he had healed him when he was injured, shown him kindness when he needed it most.

*All a trick*, the voice insisted. *You put your trust in the wrong people, time after time. You know this about yourself. You can’t trust anyone. He’s going to complete the ritual and then kill you.*

Nilandur raised his mace, slowly stepping up to the altar. He did trust too easily... His blind trust was what landed him in this mess to begin with.

*Kill him! Kill him before he can kill you! Then take the Skull of Corruption for your own!*

Nilandur gasped and dropped the mace, stumbling backwards down the stairs. He tripped and fell, skinning the palms of his hands as he hit the cold stone floor. The light from Erandur’s spell swelled, becoming too bright. Nilandur blinked rapidly, shielding his eyes. The Skull of Corruption cracked and exploded, the shattered pieces transforming into rose petals in mid air before gliding soundlessly to the floor. When Erandur turned around, he looked no less weary than he had at the beginning. He stepped down from the altar and extended a hand to help Nilandur to his feet.

“Forgive me if I don’t appear relieved. This place...” He looked around with a furrowed brow.

“It’s taken its toll on me.”

“And you think the nightmares will stop now?” Nilandur was proud of how steady his voice sounded. He almost didn’t sound afraid. Almost.



Erandur nodded. "I'm quite certain they will." He offered a small smile. "You should have an easy night's sleep tonight."

"And what about you?" Nilandur ran a thumb over the raw, tender skin in the center of his palm. Wordlessly, Erandur took Nil's hands into his own, the golden light of Restoration pulsing to life. Slowly, the shredded skin began to knit back together.

"Well, as you saw, I've constructed a meager shrine to Mara in the antechamber where we entered. My intention was to spend the rest of my years here, burying the past and praying for forgiveness." He paused, sighing, face hidden by his hood. When he looked up, his eyes were almost as bright as the first night they'd met. "But I'd also like to offer my services to you, if you need them."

Nilandur blinked, taken aback. "To me?"

"You seem like you could use a traveling companion. I'd be more than happy to journey with you." Erandur's smile was still weary, but slightly less exhausted.

"I..." Nilandur cleared his throat, laughing nervously. "Well, that's incredibly kind of you."

"It's the least I could do. After everything you've done to help cleanse this temple." Erandur sighed, eyes trailing somewhere over Nil's shoulder. "Being forced to fight."

"Oh, well..." Nilandur pulled his hands from Erandur's with a weary smile. "Thank you, but..." He rubbed his palms together with a grimace. "I don't actually have a plan. For my journey, I mean. So I'd simply be stringing you along, and that doesn't seem terribly fair."

Erandur returned his smile. "Many times, I've found that the unplanned journey turns out to be better than any planned one might have." He put a hand on Nilandur's shoulder. "I'd be honored to be a part of yours."

The words brought with them a sense of relief that made Nilandur feel physically lighter. He laughed and clasped Erandur's opposite shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. "Well, then I'll be all the better for your company."

Silently, almost reverently, they made their way back out of Nightcaller Temple and into the fast-approaching dusk. As they made their descent, Nilandur looked out across the small inlet, obscured by cloud and snow, he allowed himself to smile. Erandur was still a stranger to him, but the promise of his company lit a small spark of warmth in Nilandur's chest.

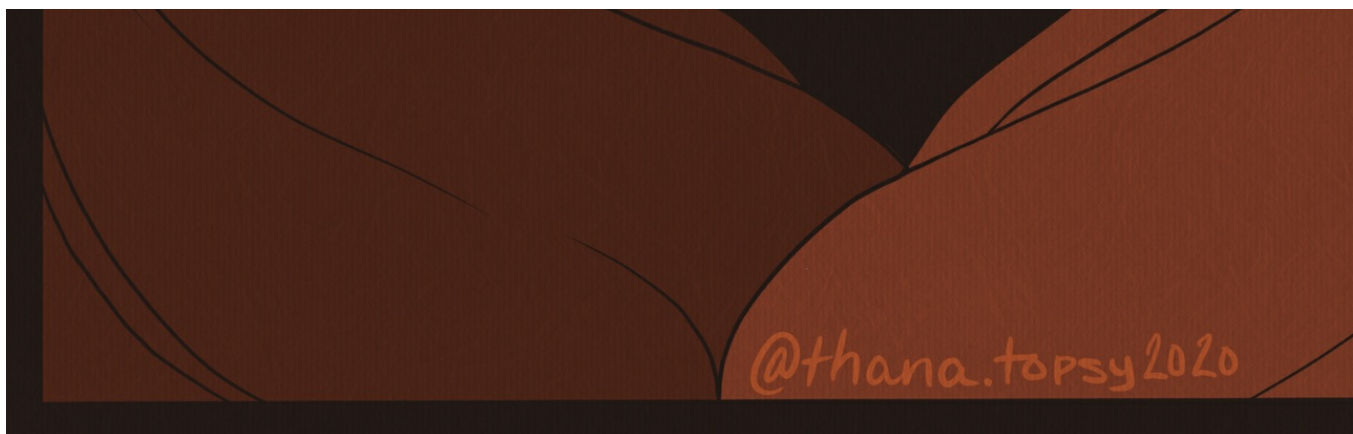
He felt less alone.

# Ghosts and Memories

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)





Nilandur decided to stay one final night in the Windpeak Inn. He and Erandur shared light conversation over dinner, and afterwards he collected snowberries to make tea. He'd spotted the bush outside the Inn a few days prior. The wind howled through the inlet, causing all the boats in the harbor to tilt, their masts pointing west. Nilandur bent his head down and turned his shoulder against the worst of it, plucking the small berries with only one hand, fingers stained by their juice. The warmth and quiet of the Inn felt like a sanctuary, and Nil returned to Erandur's side by the fire with red ears, red cheeks, and red fingertips.

"Good thing we didn't try setting out tonight," he said, squeezing the snowberries in his fist before letting them fall into the small wooden bowl. "We'd be nothing but snowbanks by the morning."

Erandur made a thoughtful noise. "Your decisions are already working in our favor."

"How's that, now?"

"Something made you want to stay here tonight, and you trusted that instinct." Erandur smiled, the soft skin around his eyes folding into a web of wrinkles. Nil just laughed, unsure of how to respond. Silence settled between them as he poured the hot water over the berries, stirred them, then set them off to the side to steep.

"Tell me about yourself, Nilandur."

Nil looked up, nervousness twisting in his gut. "Oh, there's not much to tell."

"Surely there must be. Someone like you — soft-spoken, skilled in magic, working in a *mine* of all places. I'm perplexed, if not a bit curious." He gave Nil a stern look. "Let me know if I'm prying."

"Not at all." Nilandur chuckled, easing himself down into the chair next to Erandur. "I'm just not quite sure where to begin."

"Well, how did you end up in Dawnstar?"

Nil sighed. He was bound to have to mention it at some point. "If I'm honest, it's because I was robbed."

"Oh, that's terrible." Erandur leaned forward, brow creased. "Hopefully you weren't injured, or didn't lose anything too terribly valuable?"

"I..." Nilandur's voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "Well I took a rather nasty hit to the head and... my horse. They took my horse." He laughed, if only to prevent himself from tearing up. "I've just been quietly terrified for her. It's been almost a week since they took her and I..." He

cleared his throat again, rubbing vigorously at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I just hope she’s alright.”

“What was her name?”

Nil opened his mouth, then immediately snapped it shut, eyeing the pendant around Erandur’s neck. “Ah, that’s a bit embarrassing.”

Erandur smiled, eyes glittering. “You’ve got me curious again.”

“Her name,” he sighed, covering his face with both hands, “was Mara.” There was a short pause between them, then Erandur started to laugh, deep and resonant with a bit of a rasp. Nilandur couldn’t help but chuckle along, despite the heaviness of his heart.

“A fine name for a horse.”

“You’re not offended?”

“Offended!” Erandur’s smile widened. “You named her that for a reason. Clearly it was with love in your heart.” His expression softened, almost reverent. “Have you thought about looking for her?”

“Looking...?” Nil let out a dry laugh, pushing to his feet to check the tea. “I’m no bounty hunter. Those bandits are probably long gone by now.” He watched the crushed berries swirl as he stirred, the water turning a soft pink. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Well,” Erandur tugged at his beard. “We could put in a notice with the Jarl.”

“And then what, make posters? I can’t even offer a reward...” Bitterness seeped through his tone and Nil caught himself. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be so cynical.”

“You have every right to be,” Erandur argued. “But I believe you’ve forgotten that there are solutions out there. Different avenues to attempt.”

“So, your services extend to finding lost horses, then?” Nilandur joked because he had to — he felt stretched too thin, his voice turning watery in his throat.

“Well, I did find Mara once already. I’m sure I could offer some insight.” Erandur smiled in an amused, satisfied kind of way, and leaned back in his seat. Nilandur couldn’t help but laugh as he began to strain the tea.

“I suppose it’s worth a try, then.”

----

A small boat to Solitude cost fifty gold — nearly half of what Nilandur had saved up. He sighed and handed it over before shuffling to sit on the back seat of the dingy, surreptitiously checking for holes or cracks.

“Have you ever been to Solitude before?” Erandur asked, settling down beside him.

“Ah, actually I used to live there.” He cleared his throat, watching as the sailor pushed them away from the shore. “This was back in the sixties, before the Great War. But most recently I was there for the royal wedding.” He didn’t have to add that part. He wasn’t sure why he did. Erandur’s

eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Quite the historical occasion to witness.”

“Yes, it was very beautiful. What about you?” He hoped he didn’t sound too desperate to change the subject.

“I was actually a student at the Bard’s College for a time.”

“Oh!” Nilandur shifted, feeling the boat rock beneath him. “So was my son!”

“You have a son?”

It struck Nilandur, then, that he was speaking to someone who knew nothing about his life as it currently existed. He didn’t know about Nilandur’s failures, about his messy entanglements. He didn’t even know about his son. Nilandur could completely reinvent himself if he saw fit, weave a new life for this stranger to witness. The desire passed as quickly as it came, blown away with the chilly wind that whipped across the open water. Dawnstar was slowly fading into the distance behind them, an icy shoreline and dark, choppy water ahead of them.

“I do have a son,” he continued. “I need to write to him soon. He threatened to come find me if I didn’t.”

Erاندur laughed. “He sounds like he has a good heart.”

“Incredibly,” Nilandur agreed, pride swelling in his chest. “I can’t take any credit for him, I’m afraid. It was all his mother.” And there he was, again, bringing up parts of his past that he didn’t have to — digging into himself with tiny claws.

“Do you know when he studied at the college?” A tactful aversion of the subject on Erاندur’s part.

“Ah...” Nilandur laughed nervously. “I don’t. He was born in 166 I believe, so – ”

“Oh, he’s so young!” Erاندur shifted and the boat rocked again. “Barely to his fifties.”

“Well, he’s half Nord, so – ”

“His mother was a Nord?”

Nilandur tucked his lips around his teeth, giving Erاندur a small shrug and a nervous smile. He’d been around Aerik and Teldryn for too long, now. His relationship with Brea had been taboo to him at the time, but now he was forgetting himself. Interracial coupling was still a bit rare, even in Skyrim.

“You’re a fascinating person, Nilandur.” Erاندur offered him a soft smile in return, patting his knee. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you further.”

*You say that now*, Nil thought glumly.

It took them a little over two hours to sail from Dawnstar to Solitude. They thanked the boatsman for their safe passage and made their way up the creaking, weather-worn steps, away from the docks. Ships' bells rang in the distance, the sky clear and bright, not yet high noon.



“That boat ride made my pockets a bit light.” Nilandur sighed. “I’ll have to find a way to earn some coin once we’re in the city.”

“I’m sure there’s plenty of work to be had. Look.” Erandur pointed ahead of them. Up the path was a large windmill, spinning lazily in the soft, warm breeze that blew up from the water. “Farms are always looking for extra hands in my experience.”

“I’ll be quite the journeyman by the end of all this.” Nil chuckled. “Mining, farming... who knows what else.” It was a comforting thought — the idea that his journey would end and that he’d be all the better for it. *If* he managed to see it through to the end, that was.

“Nothing wrong with a well-rounded set of skills.” Erandur grinned at him, lowering his hood. His hair was long — almost as long as Nil’s — black, streaked with gray around his temples. Nilandur wasn’t quite sure how old he was, and it was sometimes difficult to tell with Dunmer. He wasn’t sure whether or not it was rude to ask, so he turned his attention back to the path as they approached the farm.

Erandur was correct; they were looking for extra hands, and that was how Nilandur spent the better part of an hour hunched over trimming wheat. After the wheat, they moved to the potato field, where he got much dirtier. His pants were stained at the knees by the time they were done, dirt packed beneath his fingernails, but he was forty gold richer, and they even let him keep a few of the potatoes as payment. As kind as the offer was, he was getting rather tired of potatoes...

Erandur provided gentle conversation, though it was all very surface-level. Their interactions were polite and guarded; it left Nilandur feeling mildly drained, and he couldn’t help but wonder if he should have just gone on alone. Leaving Erandur at Nightcaller Temple, though, would have been far more burdensome on his mind than stilted conversation.

Solitude’s gates loomed ahead of them, larger than Nilandur remembered. Nervousness churned in his gut, and he wondered if they should turn around, go to Dragon Bridge instead. Maybe Markarth. Anywhere but here. He glanced at Erandur, who walked silently beside him, and received a warm smile in response. Nilandur took a deep breath, clenching and unclenching his fists as they approached. The guards let them in without any fuss, and the rush of nostalgia almost brought tears to his eyes. He stopped, taking a moment to look around, to soak it all in. He remembered the first time he saw the Winking Skeeever, thinking it such an odd and funny name, wandering in with Kalatar on a whim, unaware that he’d be meeting one of the most important people to ever enter his life.

-

*“Gentlemen. Don’t believe I’ve ever seen your lovely faces in the Winking Skeeever before.”*

*Nilandur’s head jerked up to lock eyes with a short Nord woman with bushy brown hair and even darker brown eyes. She had a sly smirk on her lips, cheeks rosy as she cocked her head to the side, leaning heavily on his and Kalatar’s table.*

*"I beg your pardon?" Kalatar's tone was immediately hostile.*

*She shrugged, standing back up. "People blow in and out of this town all the time, swift as the easterly wind. I like to be nice to travelers. Especially ones with pretty faces." She winked at Nilandur and his ears grew hot.*

*"That's very honorable of you." He laughed a little breathlessly. "What's your name then, kindly stranger?"*

*"Brea!" She held out her hand, clasping his firmly. "Brea Havardr. And you two are?"*

*Her hand was warm. Soft. "Well, my name is Nilandur. And this is my good friend, Kalatar. We've just returned from Winterhold."*

*Kalatar did not make a motion to shake her hand, but smiled thinly. "Charmed."*

*"Winterhold, eh?" She pulled up a chair, turning it around and sitting down on it backwards. Kalatar sighed loudly, rolling his eyes. Nilandur gave him a stern look.*

*"Indeed. We were associates at the college, helping out a bit. We're with the Mages Guild in Summerset."*

*"And I suppose you guys are all done in Skyrim then?" Her eyes were bright, if not a little mischievous. "Scampering off back to the homeland?"*

*"Scampering..." Kalatar scoffed.*

*"Hey, tell your friend to lighten up," Brea joked, jerking her head at Kalatar before resting her chin on her hands and giving Nilandur another wink.*

*"I'm actually going to retire for the evening." Kalatar rose from his seat with a sniff. "Try not to scuff your shoes," he said to Nilandur - oddly coded and cryptic. Nil just scowled after his friend.*

*"I apologize for him. We're quite tired from our journey."*

*"Ah, no worries." She waved her hand in front of her face. "I hope I didn't offend him too much. I just think life's too short not to laugh. But, then again... I suppose you are both elves, so maybe he's got more time than me to get the stick out of his ass." She smiled toothily and Nilandur felt a small fluttering in his chest, like the soft wings of a moth.*

*"I absolutely agree." He tucked a stray bit of hair behind his ear and Brea cocked her head to the side again, studying him.*

*"So can I buy you a drink, handsome?"*

*"W-what?" Nilandur felt his heart jump into his throat and he clutched at his chest.*

*Brea seemed undeterred. "A drink? Wine? Mead? Brandy? Your choice. On me."*

*"Ah..." Nilandur laughed nervously again. "Wine... wine would be lovely."*

*Brea grinned again, rising to her feet. "Coming right up!"*

*He watched her trot over to the bar, stretching up on her tiptoes to lean over it. Nilandur chuckled to himself, resting his chin in his hand. He was going to miss Skyrim.*

-

“Nilandur?”

Nil snapped out of his reverie, running a hand over his eyes. “Sorry.”

“Is everything alright?” Erandur looked concerned.

“Oh yes, it’s... There are just a lot of memories in this place.” He laughed weakly. “I got lost for a moment.”

Erandur looked up at the sky. “I understand getting lost in the past.” He sighed as they began to walk. “It’s easy to do. Memories are mercurial, treacherous phantoms. But after choosing to devote my life to Mara, I realized that there’s really no point in it.”

“No point in having memories?” Nilandur joked.

“Oh, no, I don’t mean that. I mean there’s no point getting lost in them. It’s alright to visit every now and then, but the past can’t be changed, and the future is unknowable.” He resituated his hood. “We have now, though. It’s all we have. And what we do with now will shape the past of our future.”

Nilandur laughed on impulse. He knew the philosophy well, he’d just always had trouble implementing it. “You’re very right.”

“It just takes practice,” Erandur added with a shrug. “I’m still working on it.”

Nil glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. It was the first moment since Nightcaller Temple that he’d really heard Erandur confess to struggling. He seemed so well adjusted, as if he had walked through the fire and come out the other side, risen from the ashes. Nilandur wondered if anyone had ever mistaken him for someone who had all the answers.

“I suppose I’ll have to keep practicing, then,” he said.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you FourCatProductions and DeludedWriting for being my betas!

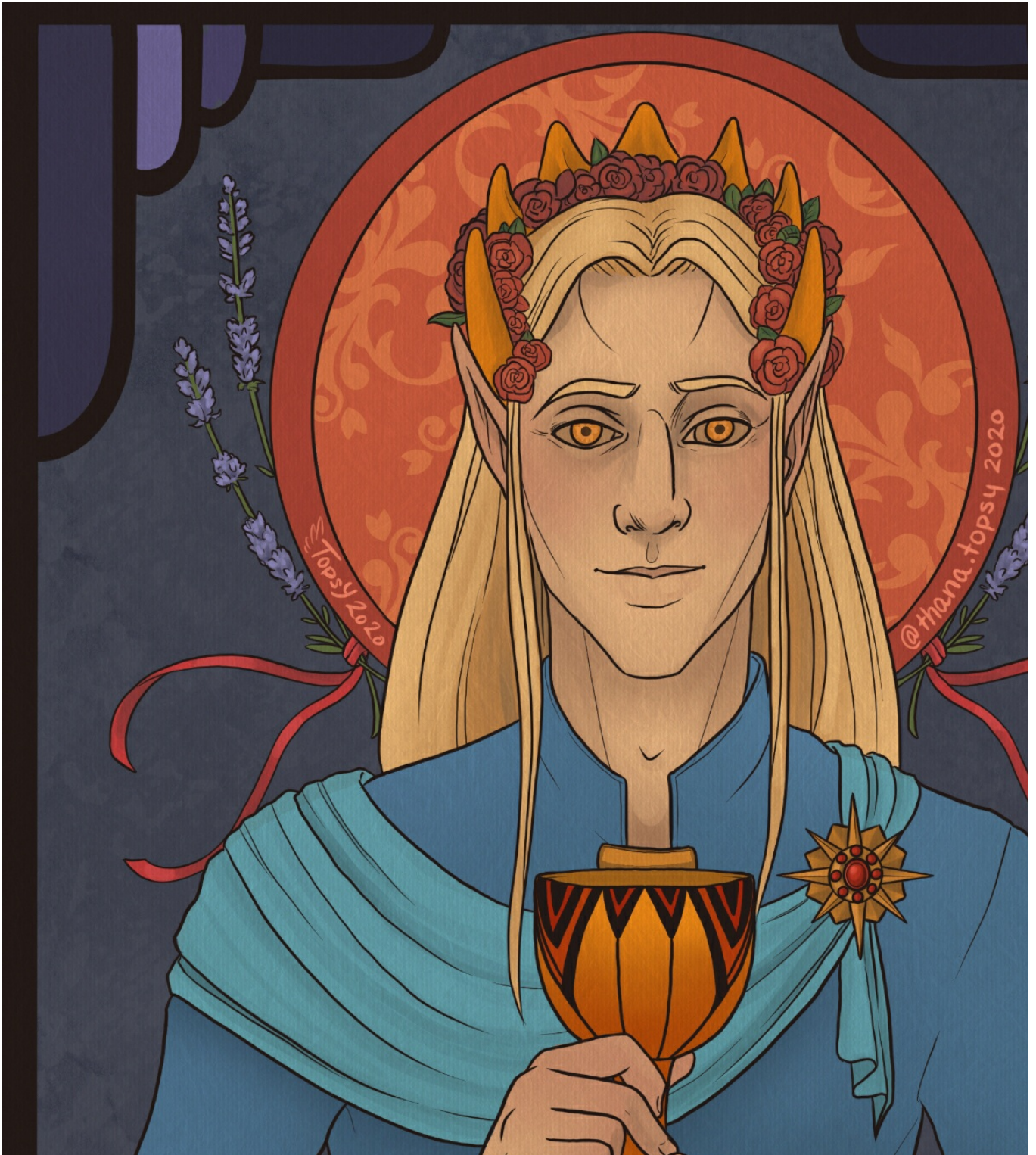
# Radiant

## Chapter Notes

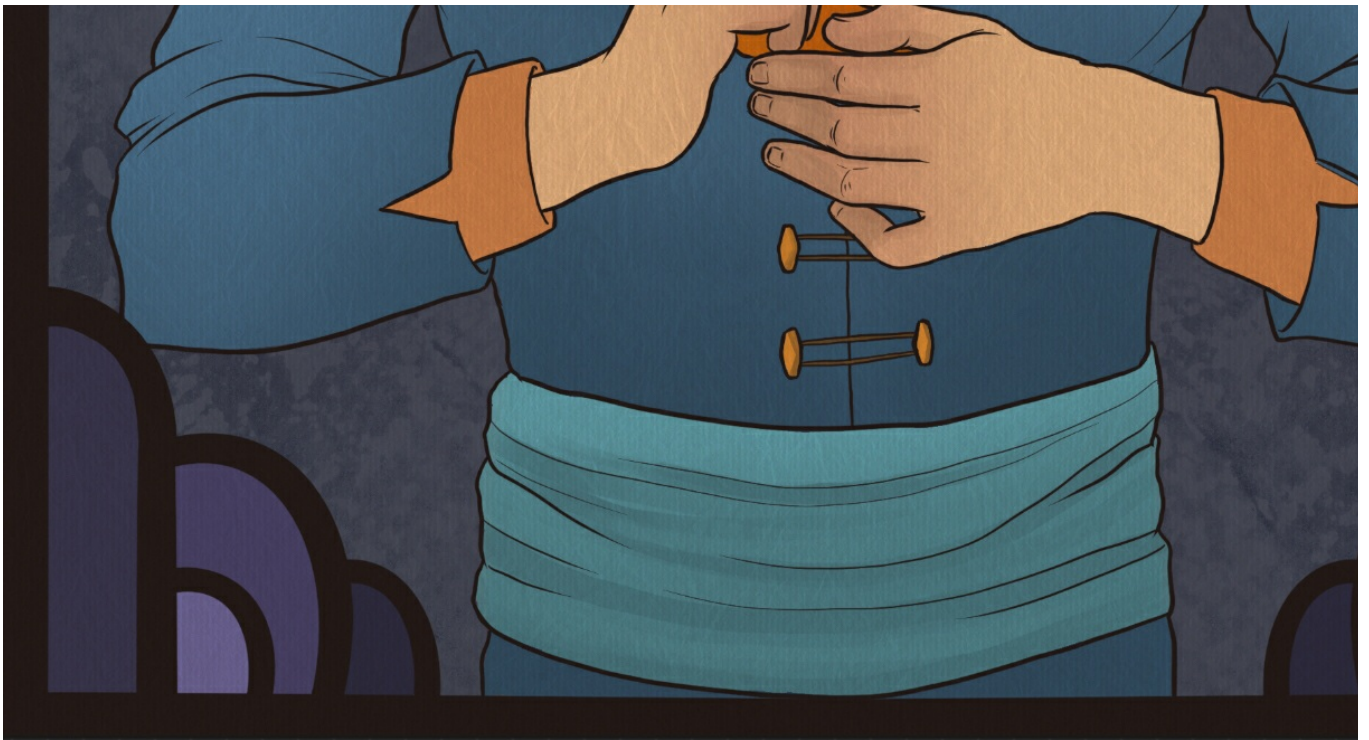
Thanks as always to my lovely betas, FourCatProductions and DeludedWriting! <3

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This chapter's card is The King of Cups







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They spent their first night in Solitude in the Winking Skeeve, scrubbing the dirt from beneath their fingernails and spot cleaning their clothes. Even so, Nilandur still felt shabby and rumpled when he emerged onto the cobbled thoroughfare the next day, shielding his eyes in the sharp light of mid-morning. Their plan was to make their way to the Blue Palace and put in a notice about Nilandur's horse. He wasn't sure if it would do much good, but Erandur insisted that it was the next best step, so Nilandur conceded. Mostly.

"I just don't want to waste their time," he still found himself arguing. "And besides, it didn't even happen in this hold. It was in the Pale."

"Well, we already put in a notice with the Jarl of Dawnstar, but horse thieves usually don't stay in one place for very long."

Nil sighed loudly. "I know, I just don't want to go barging into the Blue Palace over a lost horse. I'm sure they have far more important things to worry about."

"You shouldn't be barging into the Blue Palace at all, looking like *that*," a sharp voice cut into their conversation. He and Erandur stopped mid-step, turning towards the woman that had just spoken.

"Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear," she continued, not sounding sorry at all. She was an Altmer, tall and beautiful with severe features. She stood with her arms crossed, looking both of them up and down with a discerning eye. Nilandur regretted speaking so loudly.

"Ah, well..." Nilandur tugged at the hem of his shirt, grimacing at the stains. "It's all I have to wear."

"Such a shame." She stepped over, beginning to circle him like a hawk tracking a rabbit. "You have such an attractive frame, too."



“Not to interrupt your uninvited scrutiny,” Erandur interjected with a scowl. “But we must be on our way.”

“No, no, you simply can’t take him into the Palace looking like this.”

“I’m sure they’ll understand,” Erandur all but growled.

“I’m terribly sorry, ma’am,” Nilandur said, finding his voice. “But even if I did want a better outfit, I’m afraid I have no money with which to buy one. I assume that’s your intention here? You want our patronage?”

“Hmm.” She stopped circling him, which Nil was thankful for; he felt a bit dizzy. “Patronage from one customer is nice, yes, but I’m thinking this may be an opportunity for a more lucrative endeavor.” She hooked her arm through Nil’s and began to drag him towards a small shop. He glanced over his shoulder, giving Erandur a panicked look.

“Miss!” Erandur trotted after them, moving to stand in her way. “You can’t just abduct someone against their will!”

“Against...?” She looked between the two of them. “This isn’t against anything. I’m going to make your friend look fit for a Breton Court.”

“Please, like I said, I have no money—”

“Free of charge!” She stepped around Erandur and continued to pull Nil towards the storefront. “I’ve been working on a garment that may very well be my masterpiece. But unfortunately I got a little ahead of myself and didn’t quite plan who exactly it would be for. You’re perfect.”

“I am?”

“Perfect height, perfect figure... I can envision it now.”

Her name was Taarie. She and her sister owned and ran Radiant Raiment Fine Clothier, one of the premier fashion boutiques in Solitude. Nilandur learned all this as he was being unceremoniously stripped down to his smallclothes, a measuring tape flung around his waist, then his shoulders, then his neck. He flushed so deeply that he feared his hair would burst into flames, coving his groin with both hands.

“Arms out,” Taarie barked, measuring their length before draping the tape around her neck with a pleased hum. “I knew it.” She grinned at him, not as if he were a person, but rather a prized stallion. “You’re perfect.”

“I’m very happy for you,” Nilandur offered, trying to cover himself only to have his hands yanked away again. A thin, sky-blue blouse was slipped over his head, and, thank Auri-El, he was given pants to step into. As all the different pieces came together and Nil felt less and less exposed, he began to appreciate the feel of the clothing. It was sturdy, well-made material, with strong seams and beautiful embroidery. It formed to his body as though it truly *were* made for him. He caught his reflection in the long, gilded mirror on the far wall, and while he’d never been the type to fuss much over his physical appearance, he couldn’t help but stare.

*If only Ulfric could see me now.* The thought popped into his head before he could stop it, and the full-body flush was back. He mentally shook himself, straightening the cuffs of his sleeves as Taarie tightened his waistcoat. She finished off the look with a gauzy sash draped across his shoulder, pinned with a glimmering broach.

“Absolutely stunning,” she said, more to herself than Nilandur. “Endarie, fix his hair. It’s bothering me.”

After having his hair roughly combed through and re-tied, the sisters finally seemed satisfied with his appearance, and led him back out into the front of the store. Erandur hovered near the front desk, inspecting what appeared to be a plain copper circlet. He glanced up and immediately did a double take, eyes growing slightly wider.

“I know. You don’t even have to say anything,” Taarie began with a satisfied little smile. “He looks radiant.”

“Indeed,” Erandur murmured. Nilandur simply cleared his throat, making a show of rolling his eyes with a good-humored smirk.

“Now, all I need you to do is look this stunning in front of the Queen. Make sure you tell her the garment was hand-made by Taarie at Radiant Raiment. If she takes to it, as I know she will, then you can even keep the outfit as my expression of gratitude.”

“Oh, surely that’s too much.” Nilandur had *no* idea where he’d ever wear such an outfit ever again.

“Well, if I don’t get the response I’m anticipating, then yes, I’ll take it back.” Taarie crossed her arms. “But I very much doubt that’ll be the case.”

“You’re quite confident in yourself,” Erandur said. “Hubris is the downfall of many.”

Taarie gestured to Nilandur. “Was I incorrect thus far?”

Erandur looked away with a scowl, a slight flush darkening his cheeks.

Nilandur sighed, beginning to edge towards the door. “Well, I appreciate your faith and generosity.” He gave a small bow. “I’ll do my best to represent you well.”

“Don’t get it dirty,” were her parting words.

“Well that was certainly different,” Nilandur mused once they were back out on the street. “Can’t say I’ve ever had anything like that happen to me before.”

“She was incredibly rude.”

“Oh, it wasn’t all bad.”

“I didn’t like the way she treated you. Spoke to you.” Erandur pulled his hood up a bit higher. “It was demeaning.”

“It was fine,” Nil insisted. “The clothes are lovely.”

“I suppose...” Erandur stopped in the middle of the street, eyes trailing upwards. They stood next to the Bards College, its ornate, basilica windows glittering in the midday sun.

“Would you like to go in?” Nil asked when Erandur didn’t show any signs of moving. He jumped a bit, peering out from beneath his hood with an almost frightened look.

“I’m not sure.” His hand trailed to the pendant that hung from his neck, rubbing a thumb across the

jewel in its center. “It’s been so long, but... I left on terrible terms. It was after my affiliation with Vaermina was found out. To say I was ‘kicked out’ is putting it lightly.”

“We don’t have to go in,” Nil offered with a small smile. “But I’m more than happy to go with you.”

The college smelled of candle smoke and old books. It was quiet and empty when they first entered, only a lone Altmer standing near the back of the large room. He looked up as they entered, offering a kind smile.

“Welcome to the Bards College, travelers.” His gaze swept down Nil’s form, then back up. He straightened his posture. “To what do I owe the honor?” A slightly too-long pause followed his question.

“Just visiting!” Nilandur supplied when Erandur said nothing. “My friend here used to be a student. As did my son.”

“Oh, how lovely,” the Altmer said, giving Erandur a once-over, bending to try to look beneath his hood. “Always happy to see an alumnus. My name is Viarmo. And you are...?”

Erandur’s face was almost completely hidden in shadow as he seemed to curl further in on himself. “I... went by Casimir when I attended school here.”

“Hmm... Casimir, Casimir...” Viarmo tapped his lip. “I don’t remember having a Dunmer student by that name. And, believe it or not, I remember almost everyone who walks through these doors. My memory is one of my greatest skills.”

“Perhaps it was before your time.”

Viarmo let out a low, gravely laugh. “I doubt that. I’ve been with the Bards College for a *very* long time. Can you tell me what year you were here?”

Erandur seemed to shrink ever further in on himself and Nilandur felt a twinge of concern. He put his hand on Erandur’s back and smiled at Viarmo.

“I believe my son was here shortly after the Great War ended.” A subject change felt appropriate. “He said he was the youngest graduate you’d ever had at the time. Aerik Havardr, is his name.”

Viarmo’s eyes went wide and he took a dramatic step backwards. “You... *you’re* Aerik’s father?!”

“Um...” Nilandur quickly withdrew his hand from Erandur’s back, covering his heart nervously. “Yes?”

“Auri-El... He was a wonderful student. We were all so proud when we learned that he was the Dragonborn.”

Erandur’s head snapped to look at Nilandur, eyebrows raised in shock.

“I didn’t know he had a father,” Viarmo mused. “Well, I mean, of course I knew he *had* one, I just mean... well. You know what I mean.”

“Right.” Nilandur couldn’t quite meet either of their gazes.

Viarmo cleared his throat. “So! How’s he doing?”

They devolved into small talk about Aerik, which then turned into Viarmo giving them a brief tour of the college. Erandur was silent at Nil's side the entire time, eyes glued to the floor. When they finally left, the relief to be back outside again was tremendous. The tension had Nil fit to pull his hair out.

"So your son is the Dragonborn," Erandur said once they were back on their way to the Blue Palace. "I'm surprised you didn't mention that sooner."

"Ah, well." Nilandur scratched at his neck where the high collar of the shirt rubbed against his throat. "Sometimes I forget. He's just my son to me, now." He glanced sideways. "I'm sorry if all that was uncomfortable for you."

Erandur grunted, hood covering his face. "I froze up. Didn't think that would happen."

"I don't blame you." The downward slope of the road was slowly shifting into an incline. The Blue Palace's outer wall loomed before them and beads of sweat began to gather beneath Nil's arms and along his hairline. *Oh, please don't sweat in the fancy clothes that are worth more than you are.*

"It's strange," Erandur continued. "When he asked me what year I was there... I..." He made a frustrated noise, tugging on his hood. "I couldn't remember. I have memories of being there, of walking those halls, of being in class... But I can't quite remember when it was that I first started."

"You've lived a very full life, I'm sure."

"It's Vaermina's doing," Erandur growled. "I know it."

Nilandur dropped the conversation.

The inside of the Blue Palace was cool and dim, the soft murmur of voices echoing off high stone ceilings. The guards straightened as the two of them passed, and Nilandur wasn't sure if he enjoyed being treated like someone of great importance. It was amazing what a simple change of clothes could do for a person. They climbed the curving steps up to the throne room. As soon as they reached the top, they were halted.

"What business do you have with Her Royal Majesty?" It was Elisif's steward blocking their way — an imposing, red-headed Nord with a thick, curling beard to match.

"Ah, well, my name is Nilandur of Cloudrest, and I—"

"Nilandur?" Elisif's soft voice came from the opposite side of the room. Her steward stepped out of the way, letting them pass. Elisif pushed to stand from her throne, and Nilandur's heart clenched. She was heavy with child, one hand supporting her low back as she stepped towards him. "By the Divines, it's been so long. What brings you to Solitude?"

"Queen Elisif, please, you didn't need to get up." He met her halfway, bending into a deep bow. She laughed, placing a hand on his shoulder, and he straightened up, allowing himself to be pulled down for a soft hug. Her large, firm belly pressed against his own and it was the oddest sensation — incredible joy for the life growing inside her, and a sickly, gnawing guilt churning in his own stomach.

“Did Ulfric stop in to see you on his way to Windhelm? I half expected you to go with him, not turn up here in Solitude.” Elisif was very much aware of his continued closeness with Ulfric, though he was unsure of the extent of her knowledge. She was always so polite and gentle with him. It made his heart ache.

“Ah, yes, he extended the invitation, but I had to decline. Please, you should sit back down.”

“I’m pregnant, Nilandur,” she laughed. “I’m not injured.”

He smiled weakly in response.

“You look absolutely resplendent.” She took a step back to look him up and down. “Where did you get such fine clothing?”

“Ah!” Right, he was supposed to tell her about the clothes. Heavens, he would have forgotten.

“They’re from Radiant Raiment, just down the road in town. Do you like them?”

“I adore them! I’ll have to put in an order immediately. Hopefully they’ll be able to accomodate my added girth.” She rubbed her stomach fondly with a tittering laugh, walking back to her throne.

“Now, come. Tell me what brings you to Solitude.”

Nilandur ruefully regaled her about his failed adventure, his stolen horse, and their plan to attempt to recover her. Elisif nodded and listened with a creased brow, offering all the appropriate sympathetic responses. Erandur was deadly silent behind him; Nil was almost afraid to turn around.

“I’m sorry to hear you’ve had such a hard time. But at least it seems as though things are turning around for you.” She offered him a warm smile. “I’ll let the captain of the guard know about your horse. I’m sure they’ll pass on the information to the Solitude stables. We’ll keep an eye out.”

“I’m terribly sorry. It seems such a trivial thing to bother you with.”

“Nonsense. You’ve been a good friend to me and my husband. It’s the least I could do.” Her words felt like a punch to the gut. “Now, if you don’t already have a place to stay, there’s a room in the guest wing with your name on it. I’d be honored if you and your friend would join us for dinner this evening.”

“Oh! Heavens, no. I could never impose like that...”

“It’s not an imposition, Nilandur,” she laughed. “It’s an invitation.”

Elisif sent a few servants to retrieve their belongings from the Winking Skeeve as Nil and Erandur were shown to the guest quarters. It was a massive room with two large beds, as well as a sitting and dining area. Nilandur felt completely out of his depth. Once the door was shut and they were left alone to freshen up, Erandur finally lowered his hood. His expression wasn’t that of anger, exactly, but it was firm, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

“You’ve kept quite a lot from me.”

Nilandur’s laugh was uneasy. “I assure you, I haven’t intentionally kept anything from you.”

“You might have mentioned that you knew the Queen. The King. That your son was the



Dragonborn...” Erandur sighed, sitting heavily down on his bed. “Anything else you’d like to share?”

“I...” Nilandur wrung his hands. “I was a Psijic monk for almost forty years?”

Erandur’s mouth fell open. He stared at Nilandur for a long moment before doubling over and burying his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking almost imperceptibly. Nilandur chewed his bottom lip, sucking in a breath to explain himself when he realized that Erandur was laughing.

“Mara protect me.” His laughter was muffled by his hands. “How on Nirn did I manage to find someone like you?”

Nilandur let out a nervous laugh as well, fiddling with the broach that held his sash in place. “You either have good luck or terrible luck.” He sighed. “I suppose you’ll just have to wait to find out which of the two it is.”

Erandur lifted his head from his hands, a brilliant smile on his face. It might have been the first true smile Nilandur had seen since meeting him.

“Well, honestly, I already feel quite lucky.”

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# Decadence

## Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, to FourCatProductions and DeludedWriting for the beta work!

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**CW: Sexual content ahead.**

This... turned into a weirdly horny chapter. You've been warned.





Dinner that evening was far more casual than Nilandur was anticipating, and he felt ridiculous for wearing his fancy clothes. Elisif sat at the head of the table with the closest members of her court on either side: her steward, her court mage, and her housecarl. They each warily scrutinized or completely ignored Erandur and himself in equal measure. Nilandur refused to meet their eyes, quietly wondering how many of them knew of his liaisons with Ulfric. The food, however, was the best he'd tasted since leaving Whiterun. He almost wept at the first bite: perfectly seared leeks, roasted tomatoes and carrots, all on a bed of lightly sauteed greens and mushrooms. He had two full helpings, as well as a generous plate of fresh fruit, licking the juices from his fingers in an uncivilized display of pure bliss.

"I believe you were hungry," Elisif joked, dabbing delicately at her mouth with a napkin. It was then that Nilandur noticed she'd barely touched her food.

"Are you not also?"

She sighed, laying a hand on the top of her stomach. "I'm afraid this one makes it a little difficult for me. Hard to find food that doesn't make me feel ill."

"I've worked alongside midwives before," Erandur said. "Is there anything I can do that might help?"

Elisif shook her head with a smile. "It's simply the burden of bringing life into the world, but I'm happy to bear it. So please, eat as much as you'd like. There's plenty to go around."

They shared light conversation for the rest of the evening, sitting around the table for another hour until Elisif excused herself, her court recessing alongside her. Nil and Erandur made their way back to their room, sated and in high spirits.

“I’m happy to get out of this outfit,” Nil confessed after the door was shut. “It’s a lot of pressure, wearing something so expensive.”

“Well, I think you more than fulfilled that shopkeeper's expectations.” Erandur sat on his bed, crossing an ankle over his knee to tug off his worn leather boots. “Which means that outfit is probably yours now.”

Nilandur laughed as he folded the sash and carefully undid the buttons of the waistcoat. “I suppose I’ll have to find some kind of excuse to wear it again in the future.”

“Save it for when we need to convince someone that we’re very important.”

“Oh, yes, absolutely,” Nilandur agreed, drawing himself up straight. “His Honorable Fabulist.”

They finished changing and began settling down for the evening. Nilandur was itching for a bath, quite literally, and decided he was going to go find someone that might be able to point him in the right direction. Erandur waved him off with a blessing and settled into his own bed with a book, a pair of slightly warped spectacles perched on the end of his nose. Nilandur wandered the darkened halls for a bit before he stumbled across a young servant girl who politely offered to prepare one of the bathing chambers for him. She approximated it would be about twenty minutes before the bath was ready, so Nilandur decided to wander for a bit. He padded barefoot down the back staircase, through a long, empty hall, and emerged into the back courtyard — the palace gardens.

The night had descended swiftly, though the heat of the day remained in the smooth rocks of the garden pathway. A gentle breeze stirred the flowers, carrying the scent of lavender through the air. Nilandur made his way towards the gazebo at its center, heart lurching painfully at the memories that crept into his mind. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected, coming to Solitude. Ulfric and Brea lingered around every corner, punctuated by their respective absences.

He slid onto the bench of the gazebo and leaned against the railing, pillowing his head on his arms. Some of his hair slid into his face and he blew it away. He still wasn’t sure what the point of his journey was, and he would have been lying to himself if he pretended he didn’t regret beginning it. He was thankful for meeting Erandur, though. While their interactions felt stilted and shallow the day before, something had given way between them. He was looser, now. He had a bit of that notorious Dunmeri sense of humor, which was even dryer than Nilandur’s at times. He was a good companion.

Nil tipped his head further to the side, gazing up at the sky. The moons looked more distant than usual, half-covered by thin clouds that drifted lazily to the south. His mind flitted back to Mara, wondering where she was, if she was alive. He closed his eyes, centering himself.

He could try to find her...

*No.*

He straightened up, twisting to put his feet back on the ground. It was too dangerous — only the Loremasters of Artaeum could control the magicka needed to locate a specific being like that. Even



then, it took multiple mages to hold a focus. He'd wind up unconscious on the floor of the gazebo if he alone tried such a thing. Feeling appropriately chastised, Nilandur padded silently back through the gardens, the stone rapidly cooling beneath his feet.

The bath was ready when he returned. The servant girl presented him with a fresh robe and a soft, warm towel before bowing and leaving him be. He checked the lock on the door before he turned to absorb his surroundings; once again, he felt completely out of his depth. Along the far wall was a massive, square stone tub set into the floor, rippling with sweet-smelling water. Shelves of soaps and salts lined the wall to his left, and to his right sat a full length mirror next to a small vanity, partitioned with a folding screen that looked Breton in its design. Nilandur sighed, setting the robe and towel down on the vanity before beginning to undress. He folded his clothes and placed them off to the side, then caught his reflection in the mirror for the second time that day. The travel and lack of food had thinned him out significantly, and coupled with nearly a week's worth of hard labor, the results were striking — the muscles in his torso and arms more pronounced, his neck slender, his cheekbones cutting angular shadows across his face. He felt vain for staring for so long, but he was beginning to understand how others found him attractive.

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*"You're gorgeous, you know." Brea was straddling him, dress hiked up around her hips as she placed kiss after kiss along the column of his neck, his jaw, biting at his lower lip. Her mouth was soft — so soft.*

*Nilandur moaned as she ground down onto him. "I'll take your word for it." He gasped and rolled his hips upwards. They'd spent another two hours at the bar of the Winking Skeeve, just talking, nothing more. It was effortless being around her. She had to have slipped a love potion into his drink, or cast a charm of some kind. Never in his life had he felt so incredibly intoxicated by someone. When her hand had found his thigh, inching its way along the inner seam of his pants, and she'd asked him if he had his own room, Nilandur thought he knew what to expect.*

*Brea tugged her dress up and over her head, shaking out her mass of bushy hair with a smile, bringing one of Nilandur's hands up to cup her breast.*

*"Yeah, go for it," she laughed breathlessly, devolving into a gasping moan as Nilandur rolled her pert, brown nipple between his fingers. She grabbed his other hand, bringing his fingers into her mouth and sucking.*

*"Divines help me," Nilandur whispered, the hardness of his length straining against his pants. He could feel the heat of her quim like a summer heat against him. She was a spectre, a nymph. There was no possible way that a woman like this existed and wanted him. Him! Of all people. She pulled away, scooting down the bed, and hastily undid the fastenings of his pants. She grinned up at him mischievously, the tip of her pink tongue poking through the small gap in her front teeth. He sat up to pull his shirt the rest of the way off, then tossed it onto the floor, wrinkles be damned. She tugged and he lifted his hips obediently, letting her divest him the rest of the way before he fell back with a sigh. Brea slid back up the bed, breasts pressed to his chest as her mouth found his once more. She reached behind her to grab his length and Nilandur made a startled sound, hands scrambling along the curve of her hips. She pulled back, looking down at him with hazy, lust-drunk eyes as she guided him inside her, her mouth falling open and eyes fluttering closed.*



*“Gods, you’re big,” she groaned as she slid down, inch by torturous inch.*

*“I’m sorry,” Nil breathed.*

*Bubbling laughter. “Don’t you dare apologize.”*

*They groaned simultaneously once he was completely sheathed, and Brea fell forward, bracing her hands against his shoulders with a crooked smile. She rolled her hips and Nilandur was having a difficult time keeping his eyes open. He managed though. He wanted to watch — wanted to see every expression of pleasure that rippled across her face. She rode him slow and sweet, curling her hips, grinding down onto him. He reached up, tangled his hands in her hair, let them slide over her breasts, one trailing down to her quim, pressing a thumb against the sensitive little pearl at its peak. She mewled in response and Nil was hypnotized. He couldn’t fathom any of the women he’d ever been with ever acting like this. Though he’d never been with a human before. Perhaps they were all like this.*

*He sat up, wrapped an arm around her waist and flipped their positions without pulling out. Brea giggled into his neck, peppering his face with kisses and groaning loudly into his ear as he began to thrust into her in earnest, sliding his hands around her plump waist, pulling her forward to meet him. She had a handful of his hair in one hand, her breath hot against his neck. He wasn’t going to last much longer — it had been too long. He felt her hand snake between them to rub furiously at her clit, and Nilandur slowed down, straightened up.*

*“Yeah?” she asked, biting at her lower lip. “You wanna watch me come?”*

*Nil let out a breathless laugh, still rocking steadily into her. “Maybe I do.”*

*Brea moaned in response, closing her eyes, her brow pinching together. Her movements sped up, thighs clenching around his waist, her mouth open in a silent cry of pleasure. He felt her tighten around him, felt the muscles in her legs begin to shake.*

*He held still.*

*She came with a gasping, shuddering cry, rocking against him, nearly pushing him out with the strength of her contraction. Nilander fell forward onto his hands again, smiled to himself as he picked up the pace. She was unbelievably slick now, and oh... Oh.*

*He pulled out and vigorously stroked himself to completion, spilling onto her stomach with a loud exhale. He had to stifle a whimper, tucking his chin to his chest as he continued to stroke himself until he couldn’t anymore. Brea was breathing heavily beneath him, laughing softly.*

*“You’re such a gentleman.” She reached up to sluggishly trail a finger through his spend.*

*He wasn’t sure if she was being sarcastic or not. “I didn’t want to presume...”*

*“I appreciate it.” She pulled him down for a kiss.*

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Nilandur was hard and wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself. He turned away from the mirror and strode towards the bath, dipping a toe in. The water was hot, *too* hot, but Nilandur stubbornly

stepped into it regardless. He hissed at the heat and immediately pulled his leg back out. A clear line of flushed skin around his calf indicated where the waterline had been. He'd need to wait a bit longer for it to cool. He looked down despondently at his erection. How long had it been since he'd touched himself? There was no harm in it...

He grabbed the towel from the vanity, spread it out on the floor, and settled down on top of it. He gazed up at the ceiling, feeling exposed and a bit foolish, but took himself in hand. He immediately groaned, arching into his own touch, and *yes*, it had been a while. The lingering memories of Brea swirled around him; her dark eyes and soft, tight heat. The way she rode him, dominated him, demanded every ounce of his attention simply by existing. The sense memory shifted in his mind to Ulfric — firm, and large, and all-consuming. Nilandur bit his lip, tugging himself a bit roughly. He imagined Ulfric walking into the bathing room right then, looking at him with a cold and calculating eye while Nil lay naked on the floor, pulling helplessly at his prick. The idea made him flush even hotter, his cock pulsing in his hand as his arousal spiked. He imagined Ulfric walking over to him, barely undressing, simply pulling himself free, hard and thick. He would straddle Nilandur's face, slide himself into his throat. Nil would gag and struggle, barely able to take it as Ulfric used him — and this should horrify him, to imagine such a lewd and filthy thing, to envision himself being used like that. Why? *Why?* He slid three fingers of his free hand into his mouth to muffle his cries, to give him something to suck.

He came hard, his whole body contracting with the force of his orgasm, toes curling, head thrown back, pressing his fingers down hard against his tongue. White hot shame ripped through his body afterwards and he lay there, gasping up at the ceiling, unsure of how to explain himself.

That... was terrible of him.

Slowly, Nilandur sat up, blinking around the room as the haze of his lust-drunk spell began to clear. He used the edge of the towel to clean the mess off his stomach, knowing the hot water would only make it worse, before dipping another toe into the bath. It was still a bit too warm, but Nilandur slid in regardless, hissing as he lowered himself down. He sighed and leaned back against the edge of the basin, staring up at the ceiling once again. His body buzzed, content and relaxed, while his mind churned. Heavens, could he not even get himself off without spiraling into some kind of panic? A better question, could he not get himself off without having some sort of violent fantasy?

He slid forward and dipped his head beneath the water, remaining there for a long moment and letting the silence calm him before breaching the surface with a gasp, rubbing at his eyes and feeling a tad better. Pushing his hair out of his face, he began to wash himself with more determination. He was dirtier than he realized. The collective grime from his travels and various mishaps sloshed off his skin and turned the water a murky gray. He wrung his hair out once before dunking it back into the water, running his fingers through it in an attempt to placate the knots and tangles. It still felt like an absolute mess when he finally pulled himself from the bath. Dripping onto the floor, he hastily dried off with the clean end of the towel, sore from where he'd tugged on himself too roughly. The heat of the bath had gotten to him a bit and he felt light headed, taking a moment to lean against the vanity and just breathe. He noticed a small boar bristle brush and smiled to himself.

Wrapped up in the fresh robe, he sat down and began to brush through his hair in long, soothing strokes. It was a small ritual that he hadn't realized how much he'd missed. In his haste to leave

Whiterun, he'd completely neglected to pack a hair brush. He laughed at himself then, and the laugh turned into a small hiccup, his lower lip and chin trembling. He sat the hairbrush down, taking a deep breath. What had he done to deserve the kindness that Elisif was showing him? Fucked her husband? A husband who left her here, alone and pregnant. Nil half wondered if Ulfric had truly been planning on convincing him to join him in Windhelm. *Away from Elisif.* He picked up the hairbrush again. Blinking the wetness from his vision, he looked up and locked eyes with his own reflection.

Whereas earlier he'd been able to buy into his own vanity, now, sitting there in this oversized robe, struggling to brush through his stringy mess of hair, all he could see was a gaunt, frightened mer.

Erاندur was asleep when he pushed the door open to their room. All the candles were still burning, the book he'd been reading face-down and open against his chest. His small spectacles were still perched on the end of his nose as he snored ever so slightly, chin tucked to his chest. Nilандur laughed under his breath, tip-toeing over and gently putting a hand on his knee.

"Erандur."

He sniffed awake, beginning to sit up before his eyes found Nil and he relaxed. "I must have drifted off."

"You did indeed." Nil laughed again, plucking the book from his chest and setting it off to the side.

"Did you have a pleasant bath?"

"Yes, very," Nilандur answered, quickly turning his back to Erандur to prevent him from seeing the flush that crept across his cheeks. "I thoroughly recommend it."

"I might have to. It's been too long since I've had a proper soak." Erандur yawned. "Tomorrow of course."

Nil pulled back the covers of his own bed. "Of course." He reached out with his magicka, extinguishing the candles in the room with a wave of his hand.

"Goodnight, Nilандur." Erандur sighed, and Nil could hear him shifting beneath the covers. "May Mara grant you peaceful sleep."

Nil smiled wearily to himself. "Goodnight."

# Prudence

## Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Welcome back! Sorry for the long break there -- I got distracted by my Nerevarine!Teldryn stories.

No chapter art this time around ;A;

I really wanted to keep up with that and have a new piece to accompany every chapter, but it just got to be too much to keep up with. I have this chapter and the next one's cards all sketched out, but it came down to either "keep stalling on posting the next chapter until the art is finished" or "forge ahead art-less".

I think I'd rather opt for the latter.

Regardless, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Solitude had plenty of opportunity for work, for which Nilandur was grateful. The first day, he took on a small job at the local apothecary, Angeline's Aromatics. It paid very little, but Nilandur's alchemy skills had always been relatively weak and he was eager to learn — especially with his ever-growing desire to have his own garden. Initially he'd only planned on growing vegetables and herbs for cooking, but the impressive stock of dried ingredients that lined the inner desk filled him with curiosity and excitement.

The shop was small and the shelves behind the desk cluttered and cramped. Nilandur spent the first hour simply organizing and cataloguing. Customers would trickle in and he'd assist them as needed, but otherwise business was relatively slow. Angeline and her sister would wander down from the upstairs apartment every now and then, carrying baskets of crushed ingredients that needed to be sorted. She made a pleased sound at Nilandur's rearranging, much to his relief.

"I've made sure to take extensive notes," he assured, handing Angeline a scroll. "Just in case anything was unclear."

"Goodness." She scratched her head. "I didn't know you'd be so thorough. You didn't have to do all this." She gave him a slightly guilty look. "I'm afraid I can't really pay you more than what we agreed upon, though."

"Oh! That's not a problem. I didn't do all this expecting more money."

Nilandur still left the shop that day with one hundred septims and several bottles of a relatively rare magicka regenerating brew.

He hummed something tuneless as he made his way to the Temple of the Divines, a small satchel slung over his shoulder. The inside of the temple was cool and dark, the heady smell of incense wafting through the air. Smoke swirled lazily in the shafts of fading sunlight that shone through the

massive stained glass windows. Erandur wasn't immediately anywhere Nil could see, so he took a seat on one of the small benches at the back of the cathedral.

He'd spent quite a bit of time in the Temple when he'd lived with Brea, mostly as a volunteer. He loved the Nordic pantheon, and enjoyed cross-cultural debate with the priests and priestesses whenever they were in the mood to humor him. Though he'd had an interesting relationship with the Divines ever since... well, since he...

He worried his lower lip, struggling to recall the events of a few years prior. He tried not to think about it too much, and he avoided asking too many questions. His mind felt raw and bruised any time he did. The shrine to Talos had been restored, decorated with fresh flowers and bits of bread and honey. He still wasn't sure how he felt about The Mortal Who Became Divine. It was his firm belief that the spark of the Divines lived in all of them, and that to worship just one man was a disservice to the possibility that any of them could attain godhood. His opinion was an unpopular one, however, and he often chose to keep it to himself.

"I hope you haven't been waiting too long."

Nilandur snapped out of his daydreaming to a smiling Erandur quietly approaching him. "Not at all. I'm more than happy to sit for a while longer if you still have things to attend to." He looked around. "It's nice in here."

"That it is," Erandur agreed. "But no, I believe I'm ready to go. I'll return tomorrow."

They chatted lightly on their walk back to the Blue Palace, exchanging stories from their day. They had dinner in their room that evening — Elisif's court was still in session long after dinnertime, and Nilandur briefly fretted over her wellbeing before Erandur assuaged him with a gentle reminder that there were hardly any living creatures stronger than a woman bearing a child. Nilandur took time after dinner to write a letter to Aerik and Teldryn, recounting his journey thus far while also completely leaving out the part where he was assaulted and robbed and was now horse-less. He felt dishonest, but he knew the information would only serve to worry his son, so there was no harm in excluding it. Or so he told himself.

"How long were you planning to stay in Solitude?" Erandur asked as they shared a pot of tea. Nil smiled. "It's very kind of you to assume I have a plan." This earned him a raspy chuckle.

"Well, let me rephrase then. How long would you *like* to stay in Solitude?"

"Hmm." Nilandur took a sip of his tea. "I'm honestly not quite sure. Long enough to feel relatively stable again, I suppose. Earn back my coin."

"A reasonable goal."

The rest of the night was calm and unremarkable. Nilandur was able to lose himself in a book for the better half of an hour before his eyes became too heavy to keep open. Erandur's question weighed on him a bit more than he let on. Their small-term goals had been accomplished: go to Solitude, report Mara as stolen, make some coin. Now what? Nilandur let his mind wander for a bit longer before he finally drifted off to sleep.



He woke up at some point during the night to the sounds of hushed muttering. The room was dark with only a faint amount of moonlight seeping through the long windows, but it was enough to see the outline of Erandur's form kneeling beside his bed, hands clasped in prayer and forehead pressed to the mattress. Nilandur couldn't make out his words, except for the occasional "Mara", but he recognized the way his breath caught in his throat, how his sentences were punctuated with wet sniffs, his pauses filled with shuddering exhales.

He'd been crying.

Nilandur's heart clenched, alight with a fierce ache. The desire to comfort was both overwhelming and inadvisable. He wanted to pull Erandur against his chest and soothe whatever nightmares plagued him, hold him until sunrise if he had to. The soft prayers stopped, then, and Erandur let his clasped hands fall heavily against the mattress before sliding back to sit on his heels. He let out another loud sniff, bracing himself against the bed as he pushed to stand. Nil heard his knees pop loudly in the silence of the room. For a long moment he just stood there, staring into nothingness. Nilandur held his breath, eyes glued to his darkened silhouette. Then, slowly, as if utterly drained of energy, Erandur pulled back the covers of his bed and climbed beneath them, sniffing one last time before rolling onto his side, facing away from Nilandur. He lay there for a long while, too silent to actually have fallen back asleep, and only when Nilandur heard his breathing become deep and even did he finally realize how tense he'd been the entire time. He sighed, rolling onto his back, blinking up at the darkened ceiling. The ache hadn't gone away, and he wasn't quite sure what to do with what he'd just witnessed. Clearly it had been a private moment that Nilandur had intruded upon, but it still begged the question: had the nightmares ever actually stopped for Erandur?

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"Are you serious?"

"I very much am. Though, I wouldn't get your hopes too high just yet, elf. There are a lot of horses that match the description of yours, but the farmer checked the teeth and the age matches up."

"That's still fantastic news!"

Word had reached the guard that a few horses had turned up in Dragon Bridge about a day ago and were now up for sale. One of them might be Mara. It seemed too good to be true, but Nilandur felt hope blooming in the back of his mind; it was small and fragile, but it was still hope. He didn't have much coin to his name, but he had enough to maybe pay half up-front, and then possibly work off the rest.

They needed to leave immediately. Nilandur was adamant about this. Erandur was, fortunately, acquiescent.

"I just need to stop in here and make sure Taarie doesn't want her suit back," Nil explained as they stepped into Radiant Raiments for the second time, packs heavier than when they'd arrived.

"You!" Taarie gasped from behind the counter as the door clicked shut behind them. Nil stopped, nervousness prickling the back of his neck.

"Yes, it's me." He laughed. "I was coming to return the suit if things didn't--"

“Keep it!” She ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck in a hug. “By Auri-El you’ve helped me more than you know!”

Nil blinked, patting her lower back and glancing at Erandur with a quirked brow. “I’m very happy to hear that. I assume Elisif put in an order, then?”

“She put in *ten!*” Taarie pulled away, beaming. “To see her through the rest of her pregnancy, and then some! Here, please.” She skipped away, circling behind her desk and pulling out a rather hefty coin purse. “Please,” she repeated. “Take this. It’s the least I could do. I’ll be making this ten times over by the end of the year.”

“Oh, that’s...” She hefted the coin purse into Nil’s hand. The weight of it alone was alarming. “I can’t possibly accept this.”

“I insist.” She grinned at him. “Just keep wearing that suit and tell *everyone you meet* where you got it.”

They left the shop a little dazed. It was a slightly overcast day, the smell of rain on the wind. Nilandur was confident that they could reach Dragon Bridge before sundown if they hurried.

“Should we look to see how much she gave you?”

“I suppose that would be prudent,” Nil laughed as they passed through the city gates. He wandered off the main road, sitting down on a rock and setting the coin purse on his lap. Guards were only a few feet away, but having this much coin out in the open still caused a twist of nervousness in Nilandur’s gut. He counted the gold methodically, beginning to feel a little light-headed when he hit three hundred and the sack was hardly empty.

“By the gods, there’s got to be at least five hundred septims in here.” *Enough to buy a horse*, he thought. “I’m speechless.”

Erandur grinned at him and gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Well done, my friend.”

“I barely did anything at all.”

“And you did it quite well.”

They both laughed at that. Nilandur secured the gold safely in the bottom of his bag and they set off down the trail. A gust of cool wind pushed at their backs, as if hurrying them along. Dampness hung in the air and Nilandur said a small prayer that they wouldn’t be completely soaked before they made it to an inn.

“So tell me about when you were a Psijic,” Erandur prompted and Nilandur sighed before he could stop himself. “Only if you want,” he added hastily.

“Oh it’s quite alright,” Nil chuckled. “I just never know where to begin.”

“Well, how were you invited to join?”

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*Nilandur took the letter from the courier, brow creased in confusion.*

*"You don't know who it's from?"*

*"Afraid not." The man shrugged. "It changed hands too many times before it got to me."*

*"Well, thank you for getting it here safely." Nilandur shut the door behind him, turning the letter over in his hands. It was completely blank aside from his name, his precise address in Solitude, and an iridescent green seal of interwoven knots.*

*"What is it?" Brea asked, peering curiously around his arm, one hand resting on his low back.*

*"I suppose we'll find out."*

*He sat down in their small living room, breaking the seal of the letter and unfolding it. The penmanship was immaculate -- an elegant, looping script of ink that was almost the same iridescent green as the wax seal. It read:*

*Nilandur of Cloudrest,*

*Your generous deeds and magical skill have not gone unnoticed here in Tamriel. Few among us possess not only the mind, but the heart capable of protecting the sacred force of change in this world, for the betterment of all races. It is for this reason that we write to you.*

*We are an order that you are most likely very familiar with, though most likely assumed lost. You are cordially invited to join us in our ranks to study and to learn, to become a silent guardian of Tamriel, aiding Her from beyond the veil, maintaining balance, stabilization, and staving off the forces that would seek to destroy this precious gift we call Mundus.*

*Should you accept our invitation, you need only sign your name at the bottom of the scroll when you are ready. The rest will unfold as we see fit.*

*Respectfully yours,*

*Miremonwe*

*Councilman and Ritemaster of the Psijic Order*

*Nilandur could feel his heartbeat in his hands as he held the letter, fingers trembling. He read it two more times through, just to make absolutely sure what he was seeing was real.*

*"Nilly?" Brea prompted after a moment. "What's it say?"*

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The rain began just as tendrils of chimney smoke curled on the horizon. They jogged the rest of the way down the sloping road and into the small town of Dragon Bridge, ducking their head against the fat droplets that pelted them all the way. Nilandur's hair was soaked by the time they pushed into Four Shields Tavern. He shivered and immediately made his way over to the innkeeper to secure their rooms.

“Do you happen to know of any horses for sale in town?” he asked after handing over the payment for the two rooms.

“You’d have to talk to Horgeir down at the mill for that. He should be around on the morrow if he isn’t too hungover.”

“Oh,” Nil winced through a smile. That wasn’t very promising. “Thank you.” He joined Erandur by the hearthfire, handing him the key for the locking trunk in his room.

“Any news?”

“Have to talk to someone by the name of Horgeir tomorrow.” Nil let out a sigh, wringing some of the dampness from his hair. “At least there *are* horses here.”

“Stay positive,” Erandur encouraged with a smile. “You’ve come this far.”

“Right...” Nilandur smiled weakly in return, though his resolve was waning. “I’m going to turn in for the night, I think. Get out of these damp clothes.”

“Nilandur.”

Nil stopped, looking back at him with a resigned slump to his shoulders.

“Have faith.”

With another small smile, Nilandur placed a hand on Erandur’s shoulder, giving it a light squeeze before trudging off to his room.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading. <3

# Incredible Good and Terrible Evil

## Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Gonna be bopping a long a bit faster with chapter updates going forward.

As a warning, this is a really heavy chapter.

I'll include a **Content Warning** in the **End Notes**.

If you consider yourself to be sensitive to violence or easily triggered by uncomfortable situations, *please* pop down there and give yourself a head up - it's still vague, but you can at least have an idea of what's coming.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“How is that possible?”

Horgeir gave Nilandur a droopy-eyed, sympathetic look. “Money is slow around these parts. I can’t hold onto horses waiting for the right amount of coin. I have to work with what’s offered to me.”

Nilandur felt his throat tightening in frustration, tears brimming the edges of his eyes. The horses that had arrived only days prior had already been sold and taken to Markarth. He somehow managed to force out a smile and a bow before returning to Erandur. His companion waited by the massive stone bridge, leaning against the stone and staring at something off in the distance.

“Markarth,” Nilandur said. He took a deep breath through his nose. “Is it even worth chasing? It might not even have been her...”

Erandur inclined his head towards the open road. “That’s up to you. But whatever you choose, I’ll support the decision.”

Nilandur was grateful, but had a difficult time saying so. He half wanted Erandur to tell him what to do, whether it be ‘give up’ or ‘keep going’. Just something, anything. Making the decision himself seemed nigh impossible. He let out a tremendous sigh, adjusting the straps of his pack and looking across the bridge.

“Onwards and upwards, then. As my son might say...”

“A good phrase,” Erandur agreed with a chuckle, shifting his own pack before falling in step beside him.

The dark clouds from the previous day still lingered overhead, low and ponderous, shrouding the Reach in mist and obscuring the craggy hilltops. A thick fog muffled the landscape and made slick the worn cobblestone road, the smell of damp earth and rock pendulous in the humid air.

Nilandur's hair clung irritatingly to the back of his neck. He retrieved a spare ribbon from his pack and pulled it into a high, messy bun to keep it out of his face. They walked along in silence for a while, and Nilandur took the time to steady his breath, to count his steps: a measured practice, something to ground him. As the sun rose higher in the sky and the mists began to recede, their silence was broken by a question.

"What was it like, being a Psijic?"

Nilandur glanced to his left, meeting Erandur's eye before they both turned to look at the path ahead. "It was a lot of reading. And practicing."

Erandur chuckled. "That makes sense, I suppose."

"I spent most of my time in the College on Artaeum, down in the vaults, among the books and artifacts." Nil laughed, shifting his pack. "I became very, *very* good at telekinesis and levitation spells because of that. Organizing and sorting books was half the work."

"And what was Artaeum like?"

Nilandur sighed, smiling the sadness away. "It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. Cloudrest, where I'm from originally, was beautiful as well, but Artaeum..." He scrubbed a hand across his jaw, feeling the prickling beginnings of stubble. "It felt untouched. It was like living inside a dream — the weather was controlled by the mages, so you always knew what to expect. It rained and shone like clockwork. After a while, it became maddening. Like some sort of... clockwork *prison*, where everything was decided or predetermined by the powers that be." Nilandur let out a bitter laugh. "I always found it strange and hypocritical. They controlled their island down to the most minute detail, yet refused so many times to intervene on Nirn. They had the ability to stop wars, to ease suffering... And what did they do? They just watched."

Erandur made a thoughtful noise. "I would have difficulty watching and not acting as well." He gave Nilandur a sympathetic smile.

"Yes, well, unfortunately, their philosophy is quite correct most of the time. Even when I don't want it to be. When using such tremendous power, the rippling effect of one single action can have absolutely disastrous consequences. So, oftentimes, when confronted with the possibility of action, it is better not to act than to upset the delicate balances of life. While it is the most sacred of the Eleven Forces, change is also the most volatile. And it occurs with or without you." Nilandur paused. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to launch into a lecture."

"No apologies necessary," Erandur assured with a chuckle. "You should do it more often."

"Oh, you don't know what you're asking."

They shared a laugh and the conversation turned lighter, easier. They'd covered a good deal of distance in the few hours they'd been on the road, though it was abundantly clear that they'd have to make camp that evening. Markarth was at least another day and a half away. Nilandur remembered the journey well from the time he'd made it with Aerik and Teldryn. Suddenly, Erandur put an arm out, stopping Nil in his tracks.

"Something wrong?"

Erandur pointed up the road. Just past the bend there was a rope bridge hanging across the road. Some sort of wooden house sat at the top of the hill, tendrils of smoke trailing skyward from



behind a tall wooden fence.

“A camp?”

“Possibly bandits.”

“What should we do?”

Erandur pulled a dagger from one of the small sheaths on his belt and Nilandur went cold. “Just be on your guard,” he said.

Heart thrumming in his ears, Nil fell into step behind Erandur, pulling a bit of magicka into his palms. As they approached the bridge, a man with a bow stepped out into the middle.

“Oi!” one called out. “There’s a toll to get through here.” Nilandur saw him nock an arrow, though didn’t aim it towards them.

“Good afternoon,” Erandur responded. “We’d gladly pay your toll so that we can be on our way. I’m a priest of Mara and my companion here is an acolyte.”

The archer eyed him warily, but jerked his chin in their direction. The sound of movement behind them had Nil spinning on his heels, Erandur as well. Two men and a woman approached them from behind, all wearing far more armor than either of them, wielding massive, unsightly weapons.

“The toll is the packs you carry,” one of the brutes said. He wore thick, steel-plate armor, twisting the grip of a huge warhammer between his fists. Nilandur could see the flash of his teeth beneath his helmet, his mouth bracketed by two large tusks.

“Surely we could simply give you our coin and be on our way,” Nilandur argued, his voice shrill. “Or... perhaps we could assist you? We’re both talented healers.” Erandur gave him a panicked sort of look, and Nilandur regretted his offer immediately.

“Hmm,” the leader, or so Nil assumed, made a show of thinking it over. “Perhaps you could assist us.” He nodded to the man up on the bridge, and all of a sudden there was a great crashing, rock slamming against rock. Nil and Erandur both jolted, spinning around to see the men on the bridge had released a landslide of boulders, blocking their path forward. Massive hands took hold of Nil’s wrists, twisting and forcing them behind his back. He let out a sharp cry, and looked to Erandur, who had also been overtaken by one of the other bandits in their distraction.

“Take them up to my hut!” the chief ordered, and Nil found himself being marched forward, the sharp end of a sword pressed into the center of his back, wrists held in a firm grip.

“Please! I’m sorry!” he called out, which earned a laugh. Erandur was silent ahead of him, urged forward in a very similar fashion. Nil noticed that the bandit directing Erandur had managed to pocket his dagger. His stomach soured.

He counted the bandits he could see as they marched through the camp. Including their three captors and the man on the bridge, there appeared to be seven of them. Nilandur was a weak fighter on a good day, and at such an extreme disadvantage there was no way either of them would have a fair chance. He felt useless and helpless, so sick with fear that he worried he might be ill, which would have only made things worse.

Once in the bandit chief's hut, their hands were bound with rough cord and they were shoved up against the far wall as the bandits pilfered through their belongings. Nil was doing his best to apologize to Erandur with his eyes, but Erandur showed no signs of even acknowledging him, his expression stony, gaze darting about the room. Nilandur watched with utter dismay as they hefted his coin purse out of the bottom of the bag, whistling and weighing it in their palms appreciatively. He winced as they upended their packs and all of his belongings went clattering to the ground, including his new, fancy clothes.

"Acolyte my ass," one of the bandits said, holding the clothing up to her figure as if preparing to try it on. The rest of the crew howled in overblown laughter as she pantomimed parading about. The bandit chief finally righted himself after dropping an empty potions bottle to the ground. His eyes locked with Nilandur's and dread washed through Nil's body like ice water.

"Take the dark elf outside," he instructed, walking towards Nil with purpose. "This one said he wanted to assist me." He grabbed a fistful of Nil's hair, wrenching him forward and throwing face down him across the rickety table in the center of the room. "So I'm gonna put him to work."

"NO!" Erandur roared, but two bandits were already on either side of him, strong-arming him out of the hut.

"Keep the priest busy."

Nilandur's heart was pounding in his ears; he felt the chief press a hand between his shoulder blades, rut his hips against him. The door closed and Nilandur could still hear Erandur yelling, followed by laughing and jeers. His breathing was coming in shallow puffs, his cheek pressed against the rough wood, eyes wide as disbelief and denial ripped through his body, buzzing like one thousands insects. The hand between his shoulders slid up to his head, roughly fisting in his hair and pressing his cheek even harder against the table.

"Can't wait to hear the sounds you make," the bandit growled into his ear, and Nilandur felt pressure on his belt, the leather being tugged upwards, jerked. Then it snapped. He'd cut his belt. He watched as the bandit set the dagger down on the table next to him, squirmed as his pants were yanked down around the tops of his thighs.

"Please," he whispered, his mind focusing to a needle-thin point. The bandit said something, Nil heard the clink of a belt buckle, there was still yelling outside. His world had gone white, the buzzing of the insects beneath his skin reaching a crescendo. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. On his exhale he released the only spell he could remember.

Green light flooded the room, and Nilandur felt the bandit pause, the weight of his hand lessening, fingers uncurling as he leaned back. Someone screamed outside the hut.

"You should untie me," Nilandur suggested, his voice low and steady. The hand removed itself from his head completely and he saw the bandit lift the dagger to his left. Cool steel against his skin. His bonds were cut. Nilandur slowly pushed to standing, pulling his pants back up and turning to face the chief, rubbing at his wrists. The orc had taken his helmet off. His eyes were glazed, glowing faintly with the sickly green of Nilandur's spell.

"You should tell your men to let me and my companion go," Nil continued, reaching out and taking the dagger from the chief's limp hand. "It's in everyone's best interest."

"Best interest..." the chief repeated. Nilandur watched him circle the table, his heart pounding against his ribs. The chief opened the door.

Before he could take a single step, a mace buried itself into the center of his face. Nilandur let out an involuntary scream, dropping the dagger and covering his mouth as the chief stumbled backwards, letting out a wet gurgle, his nose crushed, face concave.

Erandur stepped through the door, his robes tattered and soaked in blood, hood completely missing, and two arrows lodged into his left shoulder. With a roar, he swung the mace again; it connected with the side of the chief's head with a sickening crunch. The orc stumbled sideways and collapsed against the opposite wall, one arm spasming wildly before he lay still. Erandur was breathing hard, his gaze shifting to Nil, eyes wild, as red as the blood that stained his clothes. He dropped the mace and strode to his side in an instant.

"Did he hurt you?"

"By the gods..." Nil reached out to gingerly touch the shoulder in which the arrows were embedded. "What did you do?"

"Are you hurt?" Erandur asked again. Nilandur just shook his head, sucking in a startled breath as Erandur took his face into his hands, wiping his thumbs across Nil's cheeks. He fell forward and Nil caught him, careful to avoid the arrows.

"Are they dead?" Nil asked, fearing the answer. There was a pause, then he felt Erandur nod against his chest.

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Erandur was silent, barely wincing as Nil pulled the arrowheads from his shoulder. They weren't his only wounds. There was a massive gash across Erandur's stomach — luckily very shallow — and several lacerations on his arms and face, as well as a rather severe burn on his leg. One of them had been a fire mage, apparently. Nilandur was quietly terrified that his soft-spoken, relatively docile friend had taken down six bandits single-handedly. Despite the knowledge of Erandur's past, he hadn't quite wanted to believe him capable of such things. Nilandur pushed it from his mind. He used magicka to seal up the wounds as much as he could, supplementing with their remaining health potions. Erandur currently sat on what used to be the bandit chief's bed, wearing only ragged pants, his robes too torn and bloody to be of any further use. Nil knelt on the floor beside him, slowly moving over his wounds with healing magic.

"I'm sorry," Nil whispered under his breath, his hands shaking as the golden glow of his spell began to fade. He rested them gently against Erandur's thigh. "I shouldn't have said anything to them. I should have kept my mouth shut."

Erandur sighed, moving his hand to cover Nil's. "I can assure you that, had you said nothing, we very well may have suffered the same outcome. Bandits know nothing of pity or mercy." His expression turned dark. "And so they should be shown neither."

Nilandur was silent for a long moment, staring at their hands, the contrast of their skin tones. "They're still *people*, Erandur," he said softly after a moment. "Never fall into the trap of stripping someone of their personhood. Even in the event in which you must take a life, you should still honor the fact that it *was* a life, capable of both incredible good and terrible evil in equal measure. Nobody is born a bandit." Nil slid his hand from beneath Erandur's and lifted it to his torso once again, where the gash from the sword was still an angry, puckering red blister across the pale gray of his stomach. Erandur said nothing, staring blankly at the opposite wall as the soft ringing of

Nil's healing spell passed between them.

"I constantly feel like an imposter." Erandur's voice was raw. "And I'm always left wondering, when will it feel authentic? When will I stop feeling like I'm playing dress-up in a priest's robes? I've been a servant of Mara for almost fifty years. *Fifty*. Day in, day out, I pray and I beg and I prostrate myself at the altar. So *when* ? When will it feel real? When will Mara forgive me and allow me to find rest?"

Nilandur let his hand rest against Erandur's thigh again, finally looking up at him. He was looking at Nilandur as if he might actually have an answer to his question, his eyes wide and wet. Nil took a deep breath, his heart rate finally returning to normal. "I think she's long forgiven you, Erandur."

This earned him silence.

Erandur's expression softened from despair to something reverent. His smile still looked pained as he reached out to brush some of Nil's hair from his face. "She sent you to me," he murmured.

Nil offered half a smile in return. "Maybe She did." He pushed to stand and dusted off the knees of his pants. "I'd gladly accept that honor."

Erandur let out a watery laugh and tipped forward, wrapping his arms around Nilandur's low back and pressing his face to his stomach. "Thank you."

Nil just ran a hand over his hair, soothing, allowing him as much time as he needed.

Later, Nilandur put to use his skills in telekinesis to gather the bodies of the dead bandits, transporting them just outside of the fort and lining them up in a row along the hillside. They removed useful armor and weapons, pocketing gold and jewelry. Erandur said a prayer over each one before setting them all ablaze. They didn't wait to watch them burn.

Night had descended upon them, and they'd decided to stay in the camp. There was already a fire and a cooking pot, countless bedrolls and high walls. It would have been a waste otherwise. Nilandur very insistently dampened any unsettling feelings that attempted to arise as he scrounged together some of the camp's provisions, reassembling their packs and making a watery vegetable stew for them to share. Erandur had easily taken to his no-meat diet, and seemed inspired by the excuse to only eat vegetables.

"It's not impossible to eat only plants in Skyrim," he said while they sipped their soup. "It's just that, unfortunately, things begin to taste a little dull after a while."

"That's why I want to have an herb garden." Nil took a large bite that was a bit too hot on his tongue. He sucked in a breath around the food, continuing to chew. "I love alchemy, but I think I love food more."

Erandur laughed, and it was a genuine sound. It made Nil feel lighter. "I as well, friend," he agreed.

The prospect of sleeping alone in a cold bed roll was incredibly uninviting, but Nilandur had no idea how to express this. He couldn't exactly put words to it, but he just needed someone beside him. He ended up simply saying as much, and Erandur thankfully agreed and said he felt the same.

They pushed their bedrolls together under one of the small lean-tos, crawling beneath the furs and shifting until they were comfortable. Erandur was at his back, one arm hooked firmly around his waist, their bodies pressed tightly together. Nilandur felt a bit of the tension begin to ease from his shoulders, unclenching his jaw, taking a deep breath.

Then, just as sleep seemed within his grasp, sense memories pushed to the surface of his mind like festering pustules squeezing through red, irritated pores: the wood beneath his cheek, the rope digging into his wrists, a hand in his hair, his belt being cut... The phantom press of the orc's huge hand pinning him in place seared his skin and his body jerked involuntarily. He felt Erandur's grip around his waist tighten, and Nil curled in on himself even further. Realization slammed into him like a rockslide — the sudden, vicious knowledge that he'd brushed up against something so corrupt and perverse and barely escaped with a scratch. His chin quivered.

*Why was it like this?* What trauma had that mer endured in order to try to pass it onto someone else? Would this never-ending cycle of violence and terror and hurt ever be broken?

His body shuddered and contracted and he didn't even try to stop the sob that clawed its way out of his throat. He felt Erandur's other arm snake between his neck and shoulder, his forearm pressed across his chest, lips to his shoulder. Erandur said something softly against his skin but Nil didn't hear him, the sound of his own trembling too loud in his ears. He cried until his head hurt and his muscles ached, until he felt exhausted and raw and wrung dry, left shivering in Erandur's arms.

Finally, his breath began to slow and Erandur's grip on him relaxed ever so slightly. At some point, he managed to drift off to sleep, lulled by the firm weight and heat at his back.

When he awoke to the pale fingers of dawn streaking through the holes of the tent, Erandur's arms were still wrapped around him.

## Chapter End Notes

**CW: Attempted Sexual Assault, Graphic Depictions of Violence**

# Echoes

## Chapter Notes

Thanks again, FourCatProductions and DeludedWriting for being my second pair of eyes and incredibly motivating!

### **CW: Graphic Depictions of Violence**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Travel the next day was slower. With Erandur's robes ruined, they'd had to piece together a set of armor for him to wear. He ended up looking like a bit of a hodge-podge warrior, clad in mismatched hides and a pair of worn fur boots. Nilandur decided to don a set of armor as well, though many of the options were either too big or too small. He opted for smaller, preferring a shirt sleeve that ended mid-forearm than attempting to stomp around in oversized gear. At the last-minute, he also grabbed a nasty looking bow and a quiver of rusty arrows. He'd never used a bow in his life, but figured it was as good a time as any to learn.

They stopped for lunch sometime before noon, sitting on the damp grass just off the road. Erandur set up a small log to act as a target for an impromptu archery lesson. The sky was a bright blue, the Karth river roaring in the distance. The spray off the rocks filled the air with mist, dusting the nearby grass with dew.

"Relax your shoulders. Now, raise the bow until the nocked arrow is in line with your eye. Hold your breath to steady it, if you must. Exhale as you release."

Nilandur's arrow missed the target, landing limply in the grass in front of it.

"Not bad!"

"It's so heavy," Nil whined. "And the string is pulled too taut."

Erandur laughed. "That's how it's supposed to feel."

"You're rather seasoned," Nil joked, nocking another arrow. "Quite the bowman, then?"

"Well, when I was a scout in Valenwood..." Erandur trailed off. Nil's arrow missed the target again.

"You were a scout in Valenwood?" He turned to look at Erandur, surprised. "It seems there's very little you haven't done, or few places you haven't been."

"I..." Erandur swallowed. "I don't know why I said that."

Nil let another arrow fly. Miss. He lowered his bow, resting it against his leg. "What do you mean?"



Erandur averted his eyes. "I've never been to Valenwood." He rubbed a hand over his face. "Actually, I don't know if I've used a bow enough to be teaching you."

"Clearly you have," Nil insisted. "You're a good teacher." The conversation felt strange. Erandur was beginning to look panicked.

"I'm going to go fill our waterskins," he muttered, stooping to grab them from their packs and walking off in the direction of the river. Nil watched him go with a lump in his throat, half curios, half worried. He turned back to the target and ran Erandur's previous instructions through his mind. Relaxed his shoulders, raised the arrow to eye height, held his breath to steady... The arrow thunked into the small log and he let out a pleased little laugh, turning to look behind him. Erandur was gone, though.

*I don't know why I said that... I've never been to Valenwood...* This wasn't the first time he'd said something similar. Nil thought back to the Bard's college. *When he asked me what year I was there, I couldn't remember...*

*Vaermina.*

A cold shiver ran down Nilandur's spine. He hastily retrieved his arrows and returned them to the quiver. He wanted to help, but he had no idea how — outside of comfort and commiseration, what else could he do? Erandur returned shortly, both waterskins bulging with cold, fresh water. They packed up their belongings and were on their way.

"Markarth is still a ways off," Nilandur commented. "We'll probably have to make camp one last night, unless we want to press on past dark."

"I'd rather not." Erandur shifted his pack. "There are enough dangers around us while it's still light out."

The day passed slowly, conversation waxing and waning. Erandur asked a few more questions about the Psijics, which Nil answered to the best of his ability, but otherwise his friend was distant, more distracted than not. Nil could only assume it was from the archery lesson.

"Please stop me if you don't want to discuss this," Nil began after a particularly long stretch of silence. "But with what happened earlier... do you possibly think that, sometimes, when you say things you're unsure of, or you think you've been to a place when you haven't..." He tucked a loose hank of hair behind his ear. "Do you wonder if these memories might not be your own?"

Erandur didn't answer for a long moment, brows drawn together as he continued to look straight ahead. It was still strange seeing him without his hood. His long, dark hair was streaked with gray at the temples and pulled back into a low tail, loose strands framing his face. He glanced sideways at Nil, then back at the road ahead of them.

"It's possible," he said at last. "It has crossed my mind before." Another pause. "Does that frighten you?"

Nilandur took a deep breath, shaking his head. "I don't think 'frighten' is the correct word. 'Worry' might be more appropriate."

"Worry about who I really am beneath all these false memories, you mean?" Erandur exhaled

sharply. “The possible monster beneath your bed.”

“What? Heavens, no!” Nilandur actually laughed, despite the frightening implications. “And if you’ve ever been beneath my bed, I can’t say I’ve noticed.” Erandur didn’t laugh at his bad attempt at a joke, so Nil cleared his throat. “I mean I worry *for* you, not *about* you. Who you were in your past doesn’t necessarily dictate who you are right now. It informs it, of course, but... oh, what did you say to me when we first arrived in Solitude?” He offered Erandur a small smile. “All we have is right now. And eventually it’ll shape both our past and our future. Right?”

Erandur let out a dry laugh. “You use my words against me. How dare you.” His smile was small and crooked as he gave Nilandur a fond look. “Like I said, I’m still practicing.”

Nilandur reached over and rubbed his hand across Erandur’s shoulder, a rosy warmth blooming behind his sternum.

The sun was beginning to sink low behind the jagged mountains, and there seemed to be few options for them to set up camp. To their right the mountainside rose almost flush to the road; to their left, a sheer drop down to the roaring falls of the Karth.

“There’s a bridge up ahead,” Erandur pointed out. “Perhaps if we cross the river—”

“We need to stay on this road to get to Markarth, though,” Nil argued.

“Well, there’s no harm in going off the trail for just one night.”

“Yes, but—”

A distressed shout up ahead cut Nilandur short. Erandur immediately unhooked his mace from his belt, jogging forward. Nilandur pulled out his bow and nocked an arrow, moving slightly slower. He felt shaky and too nervous to even be holding the thing.

Around a bend in the road was a house, smoke billowing from the chimney. One person, an orc, stood in front of the door, his hands out in front of him, palm-down, clearly a sign of placation. Across from him, three figures dressed in animal skins had their weapons at the ready. One of them held another man against her chest, a nasty looking dagger to his throat. Nilandur couldn’t make out what they were saying, but he followed Erandur’s lead, dropping into a crouch and moving to the side of the road, just behind a boulder.

“See the big one there? Try to hit him with your arrow.”

“What if I hit the man they’re threatening? What if I just give away our position?”

“If you give away our position, we’ll still have an advantage.” Erandur pulled fire into his palm. “You can do this.”

“I don’t want to kill him!” Nilandur whispered shrilly. “We don’t even know what this is about!”

“Either you kill him, or they kill those two men and we watch. You have to choose.”

Nilandur sucked in a breath, clenching his fist tightly around his bow. He leaned out from behind the boulder, his arms shaking wildly, heart pounding. He’d never get a clear hit. He’d kill the poor hostage. He took another breath, let it out slow. Trained his arrow on the largest of the three, just above his head. Took another breath, held it, drew the bowstring back...

The arrow lodged itself into the man's neck, blood squirting from the wound like a geyser. He staggered and clutched at his throat, falling to one knee. Nil's entire body flooded with ice-cold horror, his thoughts suspended in a numb sort of disbelief. That man wouldn't survive a wound like that. He would die. Because of Nilandur.

"Well done!" Erandur whispered, rising to his full height to lob a fireball at one of the other attackers. The woman who'd had a dagger to the man's neck shoved him away roughly, and Nilandur saw the orc catch him. She let out an angry cry and drew her bow, barreling towards Nil and Erandur, her companion just behind.

Nilandur nocked another arrow but it missed wildly, and he barely dodged the one she aimed at him. He fumbled with and dropped his third arrow before throwing his bow to the ground, pulling magicka into his arms. He blanked on an appropriate spell, and ended up levitating the woman nearly ten feet up in the air. She shrieked and flailed, dropping her bow in the process.

"Amazing!" Erandur yelled, ducking an attack from the final bandit. "Throw her into the falls!"

"Are you mad!?" Nilandur yelled back, sweat beading along his hairline and down the back of his neck. He watched the woman thrash and scream like a wild animal, eyes burning with fury and hatred. He heard, rather than saw, Erandur's mace collide with something soft and wet, and the other attacker fell to the ground, motionless.

"Bring her down, I'll finish her off," Erandur said as he stepped up to Nil's side.

"Absolutely not! Good heavens, Erandur!" Nilandur lowered the woman marginally, still a good distance off the ground. "Can you understand me?" he asked.

"Fuck you!" She tried to spit, but the angle was off and she ended up dribbling saliva across her cheek.

"Please, I don't want to kill you. If I let you down will you just... leave? Go home?"

"I'd sooner die than run like a coward."

"You're not a coward!" Nil argued. "You're living to see another day! Please..."

"You're an impotent fool of an elf!" She shrieked. "Put me down and fight me with honor!"

Nil looked to his left where Erandur stood, mace at the ready. He gave Nilandur a sympathetic look that was also vaguely tinged with an 'I told you so'. Overcome with frustration and despair, Nil let the woman drop the final five feet to the ground. She landed hard on her side with a pained yelp, but quickly sprang to her feet and unsheathed a dagger. With a shrieking battlecry, she charged forward, swiping once, twice, three times at Erandur. He ducked and dodged her attacks, using the momentum of his final evasion to pivot and swing his mace. It connected with the back of her head with a wet crunch. She staggered forward, gurgling and dropped to the ground, rolling onto her back with the last of her momentum. Her eyes were wide, staring up at the sky as her body spasmed, her hand stuck in a loop of movement, twitching towards her face only to jerk back and start again.

"Look away, Nilandur." Erandur approached her, mace raised.

"Wait."

Erandur stopped, looking at him with ill-concealed concern. Nil stepped forward and knelt beside the woman. Her senses were gone, her eyes sliding to the right before jerking back to center, following the same loop as her hand.

“I’m sorry,” Nil whispered, and placed a hand over her eyes. The surge of electrical energy caused her body to contract all at once before going completely limp as the last thread of her life was severed. Nilandur sat there in silence, saying a short prayer before he pushed himself back to a standing position.

“It had to be done,” Erandur said, but Nil ignored him, walking up towards the house where the two men still stood outside.

“Are you both alright?”

The man that had had a dagger to his throat, a dark-skinned Imperial, stepped forward, placing a shaking hand on Nil’s shoulder. “I don’t know what compelled you to help, stranger, but you have my eternal gratitude.”

Nil patted his hand with a soft smile. “Who were those people?”

“Forsworn,” the orc answered, stepping forward.

Nilandur took an unconscious step backwards and mentally chastised himself. Forsworn. “Right.” He vaguely remembered running away from such a group when he, Aerik, and Teldryn had first made their way to Markarth some time ago. Vicious and territorial, with little sympathy towards outsiders.

“Why were they attacking you?” Erandur had stepped up to his side, and even though Nil was still a bit angry, his presence calmed the sudden racing of his heart.

“Well, I’m the owner of Kolskeggr Mine. My name is Pavo Attius, and this is my... friend, Gat gro-Shargakh. We’d taken the mine back from Forsworn ravagers fairly recently, and I believe they’re still mad about it.” He managed a nervous laugh that quickly turned somber. “Gat and I were the only survivors. We’re... just doing the best we can right now. But please, can we offer you both food? Perhaps shelter for the night?”

“Oh, we could never impose—”

“We insist,” Gat said with a smile, placing a large hand on Pavo’s shoulder. Nilandur stared at his hand for a moment too long.

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you,” Erandur said when Nil remained silent. “It would be very much appreciated.”

Dinner was mostly meat-based. Nilandur felt it would have been rude to complain, and was left to nibble on a baked potato. He swore by the end of this journey that if he never tasted a potato again it would be too soon. The lower level of the house was pleasantly warm from the hearthfire, casting a soft orange glow across the room. Pavo and Gat were both gentle and welcoming, though Nilandur had a difficult time meeting Gat’s eye. His guilt over this fact gnawed away at him, dissolving his appetite. The conversation stayed light and jovial, though Nilandur did very little talking himself. He declined their offer of mead, opting to excuse himself early with the entirely plausible explanation of being exhausted from their journey. He shook both their hands, forcing himself to endure the physical contact, and quickly trotted upstairs with his head down.

He unfurled his bedroll near the fireplace and began to unstrap his hide armor. His hands shook

uncontrollably and he scowled, clenching his jaw. After wrestling with the fastenings, he laid his armor off to the side and ran his hands over the rough skins. His thoughts wandered distantly of the person who wore it before him, what their life might have been before it was cut short. He thought of the Forsworn woman, too — the way her body twitched and spasmed in the throes of death, fighting to live even as her body was ruined beyond use.

He heard soft footsteps on the stairs behind him, the creak of the floorboards as someone approached. He didn't turn around when he felt Erandur kneel just behind him, the pop of his knees loud in the quiet room.

A warm hand ran across his back, and Nilandur flinched.

"I'm sorry," he said immediately.

Erandur didn't respond, but looped an arm around Nil's chest, pulling him back into his lap. Nil let himself be pulled, squeezing his eyes shut and grasping at Erandur's forearm with trembling hands as he leaned against his chest. They sat in silence for a long moment, the fire crackling in the hearth and the low murmur of voices drifting up the stairs. Nilandur decided that it was nice to allow himself to be held like this, without any expectation. Finally, he sighed and pulled away, just slightly. Erandur loosened his grip.

"Thank you," Nil said.

"Of course." Erandur was looking at him with an almost pained expression. "I'm sorry for earlier. I... I pushed too hard. It was unfair." He sighed, scrubbing a hand roughly across his eyes. "I'm a bit desensitized, I think... To death. To killing. I hope that's never the case for you."

Nilandur shrugged with a helpless little laugh that turned watery in his throat. "I don't think you have to worry about that..." He trailed off, gaze sliding over Erandur's shoulder and becoming unfocused. A log in the fire popped. "I hope they didn't think me rude for leaving dinner early."

Erandur sighed again, leaning forward to brush a strand of hair away from Nil's face. It was the second time he'd done that, and something about the motion made Nil's heart leap into his throat.

"Give yourself time, Nilandur," he said with a weary smile. "Be kind to yourself." He didn't clarify. He didn't have to. Nil just nodded and ducked his head, turning to his pack to pull out his small apothecary satchel.

"I'm going to make tea."

--

Sleep did not come, as much as Nilandur wished it would. He counted backwards and attempted to meditate. He even tried to match his breathing with Erandur, who slept with his back pressed against Nil's, facing the fire. Nothing worked. Finally, with a weary sigh, he pushed back the covers and rolled to his feet.

It was cold outside, the spray of the falls hanging in the air. He walked across the road to the bridge that stretched over the wide chasm, the river roaring far below. The moons were waxing, casting long shadows in the pale light, and Nil sighed as he leaned against the bridge's stone wall and gazed out across the landscape. Sometimes he wished he could go back to his childhood, live it

all over again — the summer-warm days of exploration and discovery, of scraped knees and his mother's voice. Every now and then, he'd smell something that reminded him of home, or of some other distant, watery memory. It was never an obvious smell, and not one that he could ever track down or replicate, but it stung like nettle leaves, both cruel and medicinal. He felt too old and too young all at once — too old to still be stumbling through life the way he was, but too young to know where his next steps should land. Would it always be like this? Surely he should have grown up by now, after a full century of staggering from place to place, pulling up his own roots over and over. He sighed and pillowed his head against his arms, blinking away the water droplets that clung to his lashes. The roar of the falls was numbing, and if it weren't for the cold, Nilandur might have been able to find sleep out there with the crashing water drowning out his thoughts.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the door to the small house open. Erandur stepped onto the front porch, eyes scanning the road before landing on Nilandur. He began to walk over, and Nil straightened up to meet him halfway.

"You worried me." Erandur had to yell over the falls.

"I'm sorry," Nil responded, too softly.

They stood there for a moment, Erandur looking at Nil, Nil looking at the ground. Finally, Erandur reached out and wrapped a hand around Nil's elbow, gently pulling him back towards the house.

Once the door was closed, Nilandur's toes began to ache as warmth flooded back into them all at once. Erandur guided him towards the fire, and he sat down, curling his knees up to his chest.

"You could have caught your death out there."

"I'm sorry," Nil said again.

"Nilandur, please stop —" Erandur cut himself off, sighing as he rubbed at his eyes, and sat down next to him. They both stared silently into the fire for what felt like an eternity. One thousand words rose and fell inside Nilandur's mouth, and every time he thought he was about to speak, it was as if something were physically stopping him.

"I don't..." he finally began, and the words felt like ice spikes cutting through the air. "Nothing happened. Nothing *actually* happened. I'm fine." He didn't elaborate. "*Nothing happened*, so why...?" He shivered, unsure if it was from the cold. He couldn't finish.

Erandur was silent beside him. Nil heard him inhale, pause. "These things... They leave echoes." He sighed again; a truly weary sound. "Allow yourself to mourn what could have happened, and leave space for gratitude that nothing worse did."

Nilandur sucked in a breath, turning it into a small laugh. "Yes, you're very right." He laughed again, but it sounded watery and weak. "Have you...?" He cleared his throat, releasing his knees and shifting to sit cross-legged in front of the fire. "I'm sorry, that would probably be a terribly inappropriate thing to ask."

"Ask anyway," Erandur insisted, still looking at the fire.

Nil chewed his bottom lip, his stomach twisting with sickness and shame. "Have you... ever had something like that happen?"

"Yes."



The answer was so immediate that Nilandur was left speechless, his hands falling still where they'd been twisting in his lap. A log shifted in the fire.

"It was a very long time ago. And it took a very long time to come to terms with it." Erandur looked over and Nil forced himself to meet his eyes. There was sadness there, but also something Nil couldn't quite place — something he didn't quite recognize. Defiance? Anger?

Erandur continued, holding Nil's gaze. "Hiding your wounds only causes them to fester. You have to let them breathe, give them space." He looked away, ran a hand across his jaw, pulling at his beard. "And sometimes that means others will see them. They'll see how slowly they're healing and they won't understand. But that's part of it, too." He looked back with a soft smile. "You're never quite the same, after. But the scars become a part of who you are, and in their own way, in their own time, they heal."

Nilandur recognized it, then. That look — the one he couldn't recognize. It was *bravery*.

He blinked rapidly, looking away as his vision began to blur. "That's very good advice." He laughed weakly again. "Don't ever try to call yourself an imposter again. Mara's love lives in you. Clear as day."

Erandur sniffed through a chuckle, placing a hand on Nilandur's knee. "I'm happy to hear it. And I swear to Her, I'll never force you to kill again. Ever. No matter the circumstance." He ducked his head to try to catch Nil's eye. "Alright?"

"Alright," Nil answered softly.

They finally managed to crawl back into their sleeping rolls. Exhaustion rolled through Nil's body so viciously that it left him dizzy. When Erandur slid an arm around his waist, pulled him closer, Nil sighed and covered Erandur's hand with his own, grateful for the contact and the warmth. When sleep reached out to him, he fell into the darkness, unafraid of what might be waiting for him.

## Chapter End Notes

*Okay, I swear things start to get better for Nilandur after this chapter aahhhh*

# Home

## Chapter Notes

Thanks so much, beautiful betas FourCatProductions and DeludedWriting!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You’re *sure* these are the horses that came from Dragon Bridge?”

The stablehand gave Nilandur an annoyed look. “Look, elf, are you going to buy a horse or not?”

Nilandur sighed, shoulders slumping. “Not, apparently. I’m sorry for taking up your time.” He left the stables, trudging despondently over to where Erandur was waiting for him. He gave Nil a questioning look, but it was one that said he already knew the answer.

“No Mara?”

“No...” Nilandur let out another sigh. “There’s a lovely bay in there, but it’s not her. It was too good to be true and, once again, I’m at a loss.” He ran a hand through his hair. The watchtowers of Markarth’s outer walls were wreathed in fog, a slow mist cascading down the rocky cliffs and rolling through the city.

“Well,” Erandur adjusted his bracers. “Would you like to stay in Markarth for a while? We have plenty of coin now, but we could always look for more work.”

Nil chewed at his bottom lip, mulling the situation over. He knew what he wanted, but he felt like a failure for wanting it. His grand adventure had been nothing but one misfortune followed by another.

“Nilandur?”

His eyes snapped to Erandur, and he realized he’d been silently staring at the guard tower for a bit longer than was normal. “I want to go home,” he admitted, utterly defeated.

Erandur shrugged. “Then let’s go.”

Nilandur blinked at him, then said, “‘Let’s go?’ Really? You’re not going to try to stop me from,” he made a vague hand gesture at the stables, “giving up?”

“That’s not giving up,” Erandur argued. “You can go home for a bit, rest and recover, but that doesn’t mean you’ve given up.”

Nil was speechless. “It can’t be that simple.” Was it actually that simple?

Erandur laughed at that. “Nilandur, you’re making the rules. Why would you make them any harder than they have to be?” He clapped a hand against Nil’s shoulder. “Besides, I’d love to meet your son.”

A tremendous lump formed in Nilandur’s throat at the mention of Aerik. He hadn’t realized just how much he would miss him. He nodded, forcing a smile through the tightness. “Yes. Alright. I’d

very much like you to meet him, too.”

“One condition, though.” Erandur’s expression turned grave, and Nil’s stomach dropped.

“Yes?”

Erandur jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “We take the carriage. I’m tired of walking.”

“Oh Divines—” Nilandur’s laugh was borderline hysterical and he doubled over, bracing against his knees. “By the Gods, yes, *please*. Let’s take the damn carriage.”

--

The carriage ride took almost the entirety of the day, but the driver insisted he could have them in Whiterun hold by nightfall. Getting out of the Reach was bumpy and uncomfortable, the road winding its way through the mountains like a jagged snake. Once they emerged onto the plains, they set up camp for the night, huddling close to the fire and sharing rations. Nil and Erandur slept on the floor of the carriage back-to-back, their sleeping rolls pressed together, salvaging what warmth they could find. They broke down camp just as the slender fingers of dawn began to creep across the ground from the east.

The driver started them off at a faster pace, his horse thrashing its head as it broke into a trot. They passed the Western watchtower at sundown and Nilandur let out a relieved laugh when he saw Dragonsreach on the horizon, a darkened silhouette against the twilight sky.

“Have you ever been to Whiterun?” he finally thought to ask.

“I actually haven’t. I’ve always wanted to visit, though.” Erandur leaned back against the carriage railing, turning his gaze upwards. “I figured my journeys would lead me there eventually.”

Everything was warm and familiar as they made their ascent into the city — the smells, the sounds. Nilandur couldn’t believe he’d ever decided to leave. Passing through the main gates, he couldn’t keep the smile off his face.

“I didn’t know how homesick I really was,” he admitted with a small laugh, turning to look over his shoulder.

“What a beautiful city,” Erandur murmured, and Nilandur had to agree. Even in the darkness, Erandur’s eyes glittered curiously as he looked around.

Nervousness twisted in Nil’s gut as they stepped up to Breezehome. The lights were on inside, thin tendrils of smoke swirling from the vents in the roof. Would Aerik be disappointed in him? Would Teldryn? Would they give him pitiful looks, share a knowing glance? *We knew you’d fail*, their eyes would say. He quickly knocked before he lost his resolve. Erandur must have sensed his trepidation, because he placed a hand on Nil’s shoulder, squeezing once before dropping away. There was the sound of footfall, a raised voice, Aerik’s laugh. Nilandur’s chest tightened as the handle rattled and the door swung open.

Aerik had a confused look on his face at first, as if he wasn't quite sure what he was looking at. Then he let out a loud, surprised laugh. "You bastard!" he declared affectionately, lunging forward and wrapping Nil up in a hug that lifted him clear off the ground.

"Oh my heavens..." Nil grunted as Aerik squeezed him too tightly. He put him back down relatively quickly, and Nil steadied himself with Aerik's shoulders.

"Gods, we were worried," Aerik said. "Even when I got your letter, I was still worried." His gaze slid over Nil's shoulder to Erandur. "Well, hello there, handsome. Nil, don't be rude, who's your friend?"

Nil flushed from head to toe, sputtering in shock. "Aerik!" Erandur was laughing behind him — a warm, joyful sound.

"At least invite them inside first, love." Teldryn had appeared in the doorway behind Aerik, giving Nilandur a crooked smile. Fondness and warmth unfurled like a mountain flower in his chest, and once Aerik had moved out of the way, Nilandur immediately stepped up and threw his arms around Teldryn's shoulder, sighing into the hug.

"Welcome home," Teldryn murmured against his shoulder.

If Erandur was overwhelmed, he didn't show it. He introduced himself and shook hands with a level of confidence and ease that Nil envied. Nilandur hadn't mentioned him in his letter, and suddenly felt very bad about that fact. Aerik seemed a bit too interested in him, and kept giving Nilandur these looks. They were teasing, knowing, and Nilandur ended up avoiding eye contact. Thankfully, Teldryn caught on and gave Aerik a look of his own that immediately shut the man down.

Aerik cleared his throat. "So, have you guys had dinner? We've already eaten, but let me cook something if you haven't."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Nil began, but Aerik forcibly guided him to a chair and sat him down.

"I insist! Plus, look how thin you've gotten." He moved back towards the kitchen. "Gotta fatten you back up again."

"You do look a bit thin," Teldryn agreed with a creased brow, sitting down in one of the other chairs by the fire. "Is everything alright?" His eyes said that he knew everything wasn't alright, and there was no use in keeping it from them any longer. Nil slumped forward, resting his elbows against his knees and letting his head hang. A warm hand touched his back. He looked up to see Erandur standing beside him, offering a soft smile.

"It's... I had a bit of a rough start, I suppose." He heard Aerik's bustling slow down. "I..." Nil swallowed. "Mara was stolen."

Aerik gasped, setting down the pot he'd grabbed with a clang. "Oh Gods, Nil. I'm so sorry."

"It's alright," Nil said quickly. "Erandur has been helping me look for her."

"Don't tell me you hired a priest of Mara to find a horse named Mara," Aerik joked, but Nilandur

could tell he was upset. His voice was tight. “That’s not how it works.”

“No, no,” Erandur replied with a chuckle. “It was just an interesting coincidence. Nilandur helped me out greatly. I owed it to him.”

“How’d he help you out?” Aerik asked.

An innocent series of questions devolved into a morose recounting of events, starting with Nilandur’s arrival in Dawnstar. Aerik finished preparing the food and sat on the floor by the fire to listen. He rested against Teldryn’s leg, concern still etched across his features. Erandur told them about his past with a stony face, sparing no details the way he had the first time with Nil. Distantly, Nilandur thought of his words from two nights before. *Hiding your wounds only causes them to fester. You have to let them breathe. And sometimes that means others will see them.* He rested his hand on Erandur’s knee as he spoke — a small encouragement, quietly proud of his friend. With Erandur by his side, it was easier to tell them everything that had happened, everything they’d been through, endured together. He even mentioned the bandits, though only alluded to the fact that he was nearly... Aerik looked horrified and furious, regardless of how vague he was being.

“Fuck, Nil,” he declared with a long sigh once they were all finished. “You’ve, uh, really been through it, huh?”

Nilandur shrugged with a nervous laugh. “I’m relieved to be home, to say the least.”

“Glad you are,” Aerik smiled, but it looked sad. He pushed to his feet, checking on the food before stretching his arms up over his head. “Well, I’m getting a drink. Scratch that, I need a drink. You want a drink? Need a drink?”

“I won’t say no,” Nil admitted, wringing his hands.

“Me neither,” Erandur agreed with a dry chuckle, leaning back in his chair. Teldryn just shook his head when Aerik looked to him. He returned from the kitchen a moment later with three bottles of ale in his arms. He handed two of the bottles to Nil and Erandur before uncorking his own with his teeth. They each raised their drinks in silent cheers before Aerik knocked nearly half of his back in one go. He sighed in contentment, sliding back down onto the floor and leaning heavily against Teldryn’s legs again.

“So you’re going to keep looking for Mara?” Teldryn asked.

“I suppose,” Nil shrugged, staring down the neck of his own bottle. “Though I’m out of ideas. I was hoping you might be able to help me?” He gave Teldryn a guilty look.

“We can talk about it tomorrow.” Vaguely cryptic, but mostly dismissive. Teldryn’s trademark.

“Okay, so you’ve told us nothing but the sad stuff,” Aerik interjected. “There has to be some not-so-sad stuff that’s happened, right?”

“Um...” Nilandur was at a loss. Had his journey been nothing but one miserable event followed by another?

“Well,” Erandur began with a smirk. “As far as amusing goes, your father managed to somehow neglect to tell me that his son was the Dragonborn, that he was once a Psijic monk, and that he knew the High King and Queen of Skyrim.”

“Yeah, well, I can understand why he left out the last part,” Aerik sneered, and Teldryn immediately whapped him on the back of his head. “But not mentioning me being the Dragonborn?” Aerik added hastily, rubbing the back of his skull. “Nil, how could you? You know how much I love attention.”

Nilandur let out a nervous laugh, his face flushed hot. “Yes, incredibly rude of me, I know.” He took a long drink of ale, his face pinching through the sour taste. He swallowed it down with some effort, desperate for the buzzing relief the alcohol might bring. “Oh!” He remembered something nice. “I forgot to mention the tailor in Solitude who practically dragged me into her shop to wear a custom-made suit!”

“Oh, Mara help me, that woman was *insufferable*,” Erandur exclaimed with a laugh, punctuated by a sip of his ale. Aerik looked incredibly interested.

From there, Nilandur found it easier to talk about all the good things that had happened to him; the people he’d met, the skills he’d learned. In fact, some of the misery began to seem comical in retrospect. Their recounts turned broader, and soon Aerik was spinning wild tales of other adventures — some that included Nilandur, some that were just him and Teldryn, and others from people Nil had never heard of. He got up to fetch them more ale at some point, and wandered back over also carrying a lute.

The night devolved even further from there. Nil learned that Erandur really did have quite a nice singing voice, whether he attended the Bards College or not. He watched, entranced, as Erandur plucked at the lute and sang a low, warbling song about a Nordic adventurer that had tried to sail to Atmora. He’d let his hair down, several strands falling across his face as he gazed down at his fingers. When he finished the song he caught Nil’s eye, an indigo flush darkening his cheeks as he offered a shy smile.

Nilandur had an enjoyable buzz by the time dinner was served, and hadn’t realized just how hungry he’d been until food was in front of him. Aerik had made an array of roasted vegetables with toasted bread and soft cheese, and praise Auri-el, there wasn’t a potato in sight. Nilandur scarfed down his food and promptly became lethargic, slumping sideways in his chair before snapping upright again.

“I think you should both get some rest,” Teldryn suggested, getting to his feet.

“I’m sorry,” Nil laughed. “Ale and warm food might as well be a sleeping draught.”

“No apologizing,” Aerik insisted, also getting up and walking them to the door.

“Thank you so much for dinner. It was a lovely evening.” Nilandur gave Aerik an extended hug before pulling back to run a hand over his son’s hair fondly. Aerik was looking at him with one of those odd, pained expressions, despite his smile.

“I’m really glad you’re home.” He glanced around Nil’s shoulder to look at Erandur, before lowering his voice. “I like him a lot.” He patted Nil roughly on the shoulder. “You have my approval.”

“What?” Nilandur laughed. “Approval for what?”

Aerik waggled his eyebrows and Nil felt his face grow hot.



“It’s not like that.”

“Whatever you say, dad.”

“Aerik, we’re just friends,” Nil whispered harshly.

“Right. Definitely.”

Nil covered his eyes with an exasperated huff, but couldn’t help but laugh in bewilderment. He turned away, shifting to give Teldryn a brief hug. “Tomorrow?”

“Come by anytime after noon.” He gave Nil a crooked smile. “We’ll see what we can do.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Erاندur!” Aerik exclaimed loudly, stepping forward to wrap him up in a bear hug. “It was fantastic to meet you. Thanks for taking care of Nil. He needed someone like you.”

“Aerik!” Nil hissed, flushed hot with panic.

“Not a problem.” Erاندur patted Aerik on the back with a chuckle. He offered his hand to Teldryn, and Nil noticed his eyes linger on Teldryn’s golden arm. “It was a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Rest well,” Teldryn offered.

“Don’t stay up all night!” Aerik added, laughing as Teldryn elbowed him in the side before pulling him in for a kiss. Nilاندur shifted the straps of his pack, looked over his shoulder one last time, and closed the door to Breezehome.

## Chapter End Notes

Damn it Aerik.

# Learning to Breathe

## Chapter Notes

Thanks again to FourCatProductions and DeludedWriting for being my second (and third) pair of eyes!

This chapter contains discussion of sensitive topics (mentions of intentional self-harm, suicide attempts). Read cautiously. <3

“You have a lovely family,” Erandur said as they began to make their way up the Whiterun thoroughfare.

“I’m very lucky.” Nil took a deep breath, tipping his head back to look up at the night sky. “I suppose I had to leave in order to realize just how lucky I was.”

Erandur made a thoughtful noise. “Sometimes that’s what it takes. Aerik is a handful. I’m sure he’s overwhelming at times.”

“What do you mean?” Nilandur huffed, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. “He’s overwhelming *all* the time. Just like his mother, if I’m honest.”

“I assume that’s why you two didn’t work out, if that’s not being too forward.”

“Not too forward at all. You’re quite right.” Nil sighed as they climbed the steps towards the Gildergreen. “She needed someone like Teldryn, not me. Someone who could stand up to her, cool her off when she burned too hot. I just fanned the flames.” He wandered over and sat on one of the benches, sliding his pack off his shoulder and leaning back to look up between the branches. “I couldn’t see it then, but by Auri-El that woman walked *all over me*. And I let her... Not to speak ill of the dead.” A breeze blew through the courtyard, causing a gentle rain of pink petals. Erandur sat down beside him, remaining silent for a long moment.

“It’s beautiful here,” he said at last. “Thank you so much for bringing me. Letting me meet your family. I’m honored.”

“I should be thanking *you*,” Nil laughed, sitting up and catching Erandur’s eye. “You’ve quite literally saved me on more than one occasion now.”

Erandur’s smile was soft, almost sad. “Likewise.” He placed a hand on Nilandur’s knee, and Nil felt suddenly lightheaded, pulse spiking. Aerik’s words seeped into him like poison, turning him cold with dread. How did he always manage to do this — twist a friendship into something it wasn’t? Had he missed something?

He cleared his throat, getting abruptly to his feet. “We’ve been in Whiterun for nearly three hours now, and I haven’t even managed to show you where I live!”

“Well, by all means.” Erandur pushed to his feet as well. “Lead on.”

His flat was exactly how he’d left it. It was cold and dark, but it smelled like home, and the last remaining tension of the day slipped from his shoulders along with his pack. With a wave of his hand, the old logs in the hearth crackled to life with fire, the room’s candles lighting one by one with flickering pops.

“Impressive.” Erandur chuckled, toeing his shoes off by the door. “Damn impressive. You know, for someone with your amount of magical training, I’m surprised I don’t see you use it more often.”

“I prefer practical magic, mostly,” Nil confessed, hanging his cloak by the door. He set his bow and quiver in a corner before turning towards the kitchen. He checked his cabinets and cursed.

“Problem?” Erandur asked.

Nil sighed. “I forgot that I don’t have any water in the house at the moment. And I believe our waterskins have only dribbles left. I wanted to make some tea.”

“I can go fetch some,” Erandur offered, already moving towards the door. “I took note of the well in the middle of town.”

“If you wouldn’t mind. Thank you so much.”

Erandur simply smiled in return, and once again Nilandur felt a fluttering behind his ribcage. He watched him slip out the door with a new kind of anxiety. Everything had been fine until Aerik said something. Hadn’t it? He huffed irritably and moved into his bedroom to change. Pausing at the foot of his bed, he took a moment to sniff at himself, wincing in disgust. He needed another bath, *badly*. Tomorrow, perhaps.

He looked to his bed and another lurch of anxiety rocked his stomach. The polite thing to do would be to offer it to Erandur for the evening. He could easily sleep on the floor. *Or*, a small voice in the back of his mind whispered, *you can share it*. Nilandur swallowed. It wasn’t like it was an outrageous concept; they’d been sharing bedrolls for nearly three nights in a row, now. Those circumstances were different, though. Born out of necessity and fear. With the extenuating circumstances removed, no logical reasoning remained.

He banished the thought from his mind, stepping out of his pants and tossing them onto the bed. They jingled as they landed, and Nil paused, intrigued. Reaching into one of its pockets, he extracted the two coins he’d found the night before arriving in Dawnstar. *His lucky coins*. He laughed, momentarily charmed, and placed them on his bedside table before changing into one of his softest robes — a long, colorful thing from Elsweyr made of silk-smooth fabric that rippled like water, embroidered with delicate flowers. It had an optional slit for a tail that he made sure was securely buttoned before padding back out into the kitchen. He was shuffling through his different tea blends when the door opened behind him.

“I filled both our water—” Erandur cut himself off and Nil glanced over his shoulder, catching his gaze. Erandur had a strange look on his face, something vaguely bewildered, and he licked his lips before finishing his sentence. “Skin.” He cleared his throat, straightening up. “Waterskins, I mean. I filled our waterskins.”

“Thank you, that should be plenty.” He puzzled over Erandur’s odd reaction for a moment before it

dawned on him. “Oh! Would you like to borrow a robe? It feels wonderful to get out of those animal pelts. I have to admit, I felt absolutely terrible for wearing them.”

“Borrow a robe?” Erandur let out a nervous rasp of a laugh as he stepped out of his shoes once again. “I think you’re a bit taller than me.”

“Oh, it shouldn’t be too bad. Let me see what I have.” He motioned Erandur to follow him.

Thumbing through his wardrobe, Nilandur realized he might have a bit of an embarrassing indulgence. He had *six* robes. That was probably four too many. He couldn’t help himself; he’d bought a new one almost every time the Khajiit caravans had come through town. He loved socializing with the merchants, especially when it came to perusing their tea selections.

He ended up pulling out one of his shorter robes, its hem ending around mid calf for him. It was a deep red, which would look lovely on Erandur, complementing the soft dove-gray of his skin and bringing out the vibrancy in his eyes...

He flushed, quickly excusing himself from the room, encouraging Erandur to make himself at home through the closed door. He had to get a hold of himself. The last thing he wanted was for this to turn into another Ulfric situation: a perfectly good friendship ruined by imprudent sexual impulses.

Nilandur poured one of the waterskins into the kettle with a sigh. Was that how he really felt? Did taking his and Ulfric’s relationship to a physical level really ruin their friendship? He wondered what kind of lover Erandur might be. Gentle, for sure. Attentive. Perhaps even— Nilandur closed the lid to the pot, stifling his line of thought right along with it. *Absolutely not*, he scolded. Three years ago he hadn’t even *considered* the idea of being with a man, and now, all of a sudden, he seemed to *only* be attracted to them. What on Nirn had happened?

Erandur shuffled silently out of his room, shoulders slumped. Nilandur had to turn away, barely stifling his laugh. The robe was comically big on him, the sleeves extending well past his hands. Erandur looked utterly put-out and Nil had to cover his mouth, still chuckling.

“Laugh it up,” Erandur grumbled.

“I’m sorry.” Nil kept his smile hidden behind his hand. “That’s the smallest one I have.”

“You high elves are like walking trees, I swear.”

“With more personality, I hope.”

They settled on an Imperial blend, and once the water was hot and the tea was steeping, Nilandur finally relaxed into his favorite chair by the fire. All the weariness in his body seemed to pour out the soles of his feet, draining into the earth as he sat back, closed his eyes, and took the moment to just breathe.

“I’m curious about your friend,” Erandur said after a long moment of silence. “Your son’s husband. Teldryn.”

“He is curious, indeed,” Nilandur agreed absently, eyes still closed.

“His arm. I’ve seen something similar before, but... dark. Someone who’d had direct contact with Vaermina. *Physical* contact.”

Nil opened his eyes, glancing over at Erandur with a bit of caution. “Yes... Well, you see, Teldryn is...” *But what was he?*

“God-touched,” Erandur practically whispered.

“I’m quite certain he’d abhor that phrasing.” Nil chuckled, checking on the tea.

“I could feel it. You spend enough time in holy places... *unholy* , too, for that matter... But there’s an aura there. Something that isn’t quite of this realm.” He gave Nilandur a nervous look, a silent question behind it.

“He... He’s been through a lot. We all have; the three of us. I’m afraid that’s a story for another night.” Nil poured them each a cup. “But I’m hoping he can help me find Mara. I didn’t *want* to ask him. I feel bad asking him, really.”

Erandur took his cup with a soft ‘thank you’, blowing across the tea’s surface. “He’s a bit frightening.”

“Oh, he’s always been that way,” Nil laughed. “Even before the whole,” he gestured at his own arm. “I think that’s just from years of being a mercenary. But I truly adore him. He’s a wonderful friend. And perfect for Aerik.” The observation made him feel sad in a way he couldn’t really place. He and Erandur slipped into silence, sipping their tea and gazing into the hearth. Nilandur resolutely refused to let his mind wander beyond that moment, immersing himself in the sensations of his own home: the heat of the fire against his toes, the sweet smell of the tea, the pervasive calm that settled over the house. *His* house. One he’d worked hard to create; a small oasis of peace that he’d carved into the chaos of the world around him. Perhaps that was what Teldryn meant. *Cultivating...*

“I’m about to nod off if I’m not careful.” Erandur yawned in punctuation. “This is the calmest I’ve felt in a long time.”

“I’m happy to hear it,” Nil replied with a smile.

“Where should I set up my bedroll?”

“Oh, no. Heavens no, please, take my bed. I can sleep on the floor, no problem.”

“Nilandur, I’m certainly not going to kick you out of your own bed.” Erandur chuckled. It was a weary sound. “Especially not onto the floor. I really don’t mind.”

*Just say it. Just offer.* “I...” Nil swallowed. “It *is* big enough for two,” he squeezed out, immediately looking down into his tea with what he hoped was a casual shrug. “I’m not particularly fussy.” Erandur was silent for a moment, and Nil looked up just in time to see him jerk his gaze away.

“That’s very kind, thank you,” he murmured, rolling his tea bowl between his palms. “I think, after everything, I prefer sleeping with someone.” He sucked in a breath. “Beside me, I mean. In a friendly manner.”

Nil laughed nervously. “Of course.” *Friendly.*

He set their tea bowls on the counter and they both shuffled into his bedroom. There was an unspoken tension between the two of them, and Nilandur was quick to blame it on a lack of sleep. He shrugged out of his robe, draping it across a chair, and was debating on whether or not to put on a tunic when he turned and managed to catch Erandur removing his robe as well.

Scars. Dozens of them on his back, gathered in thick, shiny masses between his shoulder blades. Nilandur gasped, then covered his mouth when Erandur turned around to look at him.

"I'm sorry, I..." He averted his eyes. "I never noticed your scars before. I don't know how I missed them."

Erandur shrugged, folding the robe around his arms a few times before setting it on the desk. "I try not to draw attention to them. They're rather embarrassing." He pulled back the covers, sliding into bed without a shirt, so Nilandur elected to do the same. The sheets were cool to the touch, soft against his back.

"There's nothing embarrassing about scars," Nilandur argued.

"There is when you've done them to yourself."

Nilandur opened his mouth, then closed it again. His face had gone cold, his hands clammy. Erandur wasn't looking at him as he shuffled around, getting comfortable. He knew Erandur hadn't meant it like *that*, but the shame still gnawed at him regardless. He swallowed, wet his lips, then moved a bit closer, holding up his left arm.

"Here," he said, pulling light into his fingertips. Erandur looked over, growing still as Nilandur traced the pale flesh of his own inner forearm with glowing fingers. "It's so faint that you can barely see it, but it's there." He huffed out a pitiful laugh. It had been so long ago, and yet every time he let his mind drift back to the memory, it felt like only days had passed.

"My father was furious when I did it. He was someone of note back in Summerset. Still is, most likely. I can't say I care, but..." Nil sucked in a breath, tracing the thin line of slightly-paler flesh that traveled from his wrist to the middle of his forearm. "He hired the best healers, paid them to keep things quiet. And to make sure nobody else could see the shame I'd almost brought on our family." He let out a shaky exhale. "I can still see it, though." He smiled, tracing the scar again. "I think if I'd have used magic instead, I might have succeeded."

Erandur slowly reached out and took Nil's wrist into his hand, rubbing his thumb across his pulse point. "Is this the only time—?"

"Yes." Nil nodded. "The thoughts... They never really go away. After so many years it gets easier to... not control them. Ignore them, I suppose. But they're constantly there. *Constantly*." A shiver crept up his arm as Erandur continued to run his thumb gently across his wrist. "I think they were the worst they'd been in a long time right before I met you."

It felt good to admit. He'd only ever spoken to some of the masters on Artaeum about this. He had been terrified to bring it up, but it had been impeding his growth. A blockage in his path. And once it was out, they'd been so kind to him... It had made him slightly less afraid.

"But despite it all," Nilandur continued. "I do find life to be wonderfully beautiful. To be worth living. It's... an odd paradox that lives inside me. Feeling unworthy of life, yet so desperate to live



it. I've just grown to accept it over the years."

Then, before Nilandur could even draw his next breath, Erandur leaned down and pressed his lips to Nilandur's forearm. Time seemed to stop. Nilandur's heart rate doubled, beating so furiously against his sternum that he *knew* Erandur could hear it. Then Erandur pulled away, and the lingering warmth of his lips clung to Nilandur's skin like a ghost.

"Thank you for sharing with me," Erandur murmured.

Nilandur let out another shuddering breath, his fingers still glowing faintly. He managed a smile. "I'm giving it room to breathe."

Erandur's face twisted into something painful, and he nodded with a sigh and a tight smile. Nilandur realized how close they were, and he pulled back.

"Sleep well, Erandur."

Erandur opened his mouth, inhaled, then let out a breathy laugh. "You as well. I'm happy to be in a proper bed. So thank you for sharing that, too."

"Of course." Nilandur smiled as he settled down against his pillow, turning to face away. His heart was beating so furiously against his ribcage that he lay awake for another half hour, staring at the wall, his mind buzzing, the skin on his wrist tingling. At last, he lulled himself to sleep by attempting to match his breathing to Erandur's.

When he awoke the next morning, he nearly forgot where he was. Warm light streamed through the shuttered windows of his bedroom, casting diagonal shafts across the worn floorboards. He rolled onto his back with a sigh, stretching his arms up over his head. When he looked to his right, his heart leapt into his throat. Erandur was still asleep, his expression peaceful, the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth softer than usual. He blinked awake while Nilandur was still staring, and it was too late to look away.

"Good morning," Nil offered, his own voice dry and rough from sleep.

Erandur smiled, pushing some hair out of his face as he rolled onto his back. "Good morning." He groaned into a stretch as well, tipping his head back and sighing loudly. "It's wonderful to be able to sleep soundly, don't you think?" He looked back over, his expression joyful, refreshed.

Nilandur was in love with him.

# Carry the Fire

## Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, to my wonderful betas, FourCatProductions and DeludedWriting!

“So, you want *me* to find her?” Nil asked in disbelief.

Teldryn nodded.

They sat opposite each other, cross-legged on the cool grass of Teldryn and Aerik’s small garden — almost an exact mirror of the time Nilandur had been teaching Teldryn mental spellcasting. Oh, how the student had become the master, and Nilandur was beginning to realize just how frustrating it was to be the student again.

“I can’t,” Nil insisted. “On Artaeum it took multiple mages to do a simple location spell.”

“That was on a much larger scale,” Teldryn said. “And often they didn’t know where they should be looking.”

Nilandur bit his lip. “Can’t you just,” he motioned to Teldryn’s golden arm, “use that?” This earned him a sigh he felt in his bones.

“Nilandur.”

“I know, I’m sorry...”

“First of all, it’s not something I ‘use’. It just is. And you can access it just as easily. You already have, so don’t try to play dumb with me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If you say you’re sorry one more time, I’m going to rip out your tongue.”

“I’m—” Nilandur tucked his lips around his teeth, eyes wide.

Teldryn let out a hoarse chuckle, leaning back on his hands. “Let’s start small. Find Aerik.”

“He’s just inside, though.” Nilandur motioned over his shoulder.

“Yes, but where? And what’s he doing?”

“Do I actually want to know?”

Teldryn threw his head back, white teeth flashing in the midday sun as he laughed. “Fair argument, but I can assure you, if he was doing something compromising, I wouldn’t have asked you to look in the first place.” He grinned, and Nilandur felt at least a little pleased with himself.

“Alright, so I just...”

“You know what to do.”

Nilandur sighed loudly, closing his eyes and placing his hands in his lap. He took several deep breaths, realigning himself with the push and pull of the Weave, the gentle ebb and flow of magicka that surrounded them. He began to push outwards, calling upon the spell to detect life.

“Stop.”

Nil’s eyes snapped open and he scowled. “Was that wrong?”

“This isn’t about detecting life, this is about finding something. Or someone.”

Nil threw his hands up in exasperation. “Well, there has to be a basis to use!”

“Think.” Teldryn leaned forward again, tapping the ground between them. “What do you use when you’re lost and need to find the path?”

“Clairvoyance,” Nil answered immediately, then slouched forward in defeat. “Right...” He straightened back up, placing his hands gently in his lap and closing his eyes.

The connection was more immediate this time, and he couldn’t help but smile. The Weave reached out to him, and he reached back. Illusion magic was his strong suit. This should be easy.

The hazy outline of a figure began to appear in his mind’s eye, shimmering in a misty purple light. *Aerik*. His son. A person who only existed in the world because Nilandur had existed before him. Nil smiled to himself, then expanded the spell, creating distance, trying to see more. Aerik was hunched over, grasping something in his hand. Familiar shapes began to form out of the swirling smoke.

“He’s at the alchemy table.”

Teldryn was nodding when he opened his eyes. “See?”

“But I knew he was inside — I knew where to look.”

“It’s practice. Just like any other skill, you have to walk before you run.”

“But it could take months to master!” It didn’t make sense. Why was Teldryn forcing him to do this when he could so easily just reach out into the Weave and *find his horse*?

“Where’s Erandur?”

Nil’s heart skipped a beat and he sat up a little straighter. “Oh. He’s, um...”

“I don’t want you to *tell* me where he is, I want you to *look*.”

Nil worried the hem of his shirt, eyes darting between Teldryn and the ground. Erandur had told him that he’d be at the temple of Kynareth. So, again, he already knew where he was. But maybe... Maybe he shouldn’t be using what he *knew*, more so what he *felt*.

Nilandur stilled his hands, stacking them in his lap, and began the process again. Instead of reaching out to the place he thought Erandur *might* be, he reached out instead to Erandur. Just Erandur.

Nil summoned his very essence into his mind’s eye, and shapes began to form almost immediately. Erandur’s face swirled into view, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his lips, clean robes and a hood pulled up around his head. Nilandur expanded the spell. He saw Erandur kneeling before

someone, healing them. A smokey shape rolled past him, slowly forming into Danica Purespring, her arms filled with fresh linens. He pulled back further, the full temple unfurling like a tapestry, then pushed forward again, focusing on Erandur's face. He was saying something to whoever he was healing, his lips, still curled into a smile, moving silently. He laughed, and though Nilandur couldn't hear him, he could feel it. He opened his eyes, staring down at his hands with a smile.

"He's healing someone. At the temple of Kynareth."

Teldryn nodded, his expression a bit mischievous. "Now find Mara."

"What!?" Panic spiked and Nilandur felt suddenly light-headed. "Right now? I've barely practiced!"

"I think you'll manage." Teldryn leaned back again, motioning with his chin for Nilandur to begin. "Do what you just did."

"I..." Nilandur swallowed. He inhaled, trying to calm the sudden shaking of his hands, and straightened his posture. *In and out, in and out.* Teldryn seemed confident. Just do what he'd just done...

He thought of Mara: the feel of her coat beneath his fingers, her raspy knicker, the way she smelled — like oats and grass and warmth. He thought of the first time he'd met her, his forehead pressed against her face, calmly stroking her neck, her hot breath puffing against his stomach. She was peace embodied, cool like a mountain stream, clear like a cloudless sky.

Her face swam into view, and she looked tired, almost sad — Nilandur felt his throat tighten, tears prickling in the corners of his eyes. *It was her.* He was seeing *her*. *She was alive.* He backed out, ever so slightly, carefully, terrified of breaking the spell. Her surroundings began to unfurl like tendrils of smoke: hay-padded floors, stalls, stable hands, but where...? He backed out, more. Stonework, snow. Backed out, backed out... His stomach churned as the surroundings settled into place, sliding across his vision like a thunderhead, and he opened his eyes.

"She's in Windhelm."

Teldryn nodded solemnly, but otherwise remained silent.

Nilandur leaned forward, holding his head in his hands. *If he'd just gone right...*

"Do you know why you were able to find her?" Teldryn asked after a long moment. "While the Psijics need multiple mages to do something similar?"

Nilandur shook his head, his face still buried in his hands.

"Because you *love* her. Love is the most durable of the Eleven Sacred Forces." Nilandur couldn't help but laugh at that. Teldryn was speaking in Psijic terms. From anyone else, it might have felt patronizing, but Nilandur pulled his face from his hands, looking up.

"Without it," Teldryn continued, "We would have no past. No future. It is the force that connects us, and it is how we *endure*. You, of all people, know this incredibly well." Teldryn rocked to his feet, placing a hand atop Nil's head as he walked by. "Carry the fire, Nilandur. Just as you always have. She's waiting for you."

Nilandur was left alone in the garden, overwhelmed with both incredible joy and tremendous dread. He slowly got to his feet, trudging back up the Whiterun thoroughfare towards his flat.

It wasn't until he got the market that he realized Teldryn's implications:

That it had been easy to find those that he loved.

----

“This is great news!” Erandur exclaimed, clasping Nilandur’s shoulders in both his hands. “We’ll set out tomorrow morning. At dawn. No, before dawn.”

Nilandur hummed in agreement, his eyes unfocused.

“Is everything alright?”

Nilandur returned his attention to Erandur’s face. He looked concerned. Nil tried to smile. “Yes, I’m very relieved.”

Erandur let out a huff, raising a brow. “Very good. You almost had me convinced.”

Nilandur pulled away from him, walking over to collapse into one of the chairs by the hearth. He leaned heavily to one side, resting his jaw against his fist as he gazed into the fire. Erandur sat down next to him, waiting quietly. Nilandur was silent for a moment longer, wondering where to start. How could he even begin to explain himself?

“There’s...” He swallowed. “One final thing that I haven’t told you. About me. About my past.”

Erandur remained silent.

“It has to do with the High King. Ulfric...”

He told him everything, nearly choking on his own words as he tried. They were raw on his tongue, dripping from his mouth like bile. Erandur was completely silent beside him, and neither of them met each other’s eyes as Nilandur recounted the last year and a half of his complex, messy relationship with Ulfric Stormcloak. *Let him see*, he told himself. *Let him see your scars.*

“And I had a decision,” he said finally. “To go left, to Dawnstar, or right, to Windhelm...” He leaned forward, running his hands through his hair. “And maybe she would have been *right there*. This whole time. Had I just gone right...”

Erandur still said nothing, and Nil heard him shift in his seat. “Well,” he began, after the long stretch of silence had passed. “It’s hard to say what might have happened, or what you should have done. But, selfishly, I have to say, I’m rather glad you went left.” He looked over then, offering a small smile. “And whatever you choose going forward, I’m happy to have met you — and to call you my friend.”

Nil returned the smile with one of his own, followed by a watery laugh. “I have to say that, despite everything, I feel the same.”

---

The carriage ride was unpleasant -- it began raining halfway through the day and the driver pulled off to the side to raise the cover, but not before Nil and Erandur were thoroughly soaked. They shivered beside each other as the weather turned cold once they'd crossed into the Pale. Erandur was quieter than usual. Nilandur blamed the weather. He hoped it was the weather.

"What was it like growing up in Skyrim?" he asked, when he couldn't take the silence any longer. "As an elf?"

Erandur looked at him from beneath his hood, his expression thoughtful. He adjusted his cloak around his shoulders before he spoke. "If I'm remembering a childhood that's actually my own, it was quite pleasant." He paused, exhaling, and Nil saw a curl of steam leave his mouth. "But I was inducted into the cult of Vaermina before I turned thirty. Still a child, if you ask me... I didn't think so at the time, of course. I was just..." He trailed off, folding in on himself a little more. "So eager. Eager to devote myself to *something*... Anything. My parents were refugees of the Red Year. House Hlaalu, not that it meant anything to me at the time. Not that I cared." He sighed. "They wanted me to uphold our Dunmeri traditions, but I just wanted to belong. At the same time, I didn't want to be seen as some sad Dunmer, masquerading as a Nord. So when I was offered power, control over my own destiny, I took it. Of course, I didn't realize that I was actually becoming a prisoner." He shifted in his seat. "I'm just thankful that I got out when I did. Even if it was out of fear."

Nil couldn't help but to himself. "So when you left the cult, you chose to devote yourself to Mara instead?"

"Hmm." Erandur let out a raspy chuckle. "I never thought of it like that. But I suppose that's what happened." Nilandur saw his mouth twist into a grin beneath his hood. "I'm always looking to be in service of something, it seems."

"Well, you did volunteer to aid me pretty quickly."

Erandur laughed a little more openly at that, turning to look at Nil, his eyes brighter than they had been. "Probably one of my better decisions, if I'm honest."

"Really?" Nil leaned back against the carriage seat. "You're going to sit here, half-frozen, soaked to the bone in the back of a carriage to *Windhelm*, and tell me that *this* is one of the better decisions of your life?"

"Yes," Erandur insisted, "I am." He reached a hand out from beneath his cloak, placing it on Nil's knee, giving it a light squeeze.

Nilandur's chest tightened, his heart clenching so suddenly that it was almost painful. Slowly, tentatively, he slid his own hand free, covering Erandur's. Both of their fingers were cold, but the touch — that small, delicate touch — was electrifying. Nil leaned back with a sigh and closed his eyes. He felt Erandur lace their fingers together, rubbing his thumb softly across his knuckles, circling his joints. His heart felt like it was going to pound its way out of his chest, an exquisite ache pulsing down the centerline of his body. Erandur leaned against him, and Nil did the same, resting his head against Erandur's hood. They stayed like that for the rest of the journey.

# Someone Else's Future

## Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to [jottingprosaist](#) for helping with this chapter! Our local Ulfric expert and connoisseur of pain and angst. uwu

There's nothing specifically to warn about in this chapter other than it's just... tense. The entire time, pretty much.

So get ready for tension.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Mara.”

Nilandur wasn't sure what he had expected, but the deluge of emotions at finally seeing his horse was almost too much to bear. She perked up immediately, her ears swiveling forward, letting out a soft, low nicker as he stumbled towards her.

“My beautiful girl. My sweet girl.”

She stepped forward in her stall, tossing her head once before dipping it low to press against his chest as he walked up to embrace her.

“Huh.” The stablehand was a slightly baffled-looking Altmer who leaned against one of the posts. He watched Nilandur with a curious expression, scratching at his neck. “So you know that horse? She turned up about a month ago. Looked like she'd been running through the woods for a while, scared out of her mind, hungry as all get-out.”

“I thought she was stolen,” Nilandur murmured into her forelock.

“We've been looking for her, actually,” Erandur explained.

“Well, I think she was looking for you, too.”

Hot, ugly emotion welled up inside Nilandur's throat. It was blistering when it finally erupted, and he sobbed. He didn't care who saw or heard. He let himself go; curled his fingers into Mara's mane and wept, his body shuddering through the tears. He smiled and kissed her face, whispering promises and soothing words, and he wondered in the back of his mind who he was really attempting to comfort. Eventually, he stepped back, wiping his eyes on his sleeve, and turned to the stablehand with a sheepish smile.

“I'll pay you whatever you want for her.”

“Oh.” He seemed taken-aback. His expression softened. “She was just a lost horse. Clearly she's yours.” He offered a kind smile. “You don't have to pay for her. I'm happy to see that someone



loves her.”

“Please, I insist,” Nilandur reached into his coin purse, pulling out a handful of gold coins, shoving them into the mer’s hands. “For taking care of her, at the very least. Please.”

The Altmer continued to look at Nilandur, his expression landing somewhere between sympathetic and troubled. He slowly pocketed the gold before patting Nil’s shoulder amicably. “I’m very happy you found your horse. If you need to board her here overnight, consider the cost covered.”

Nil’s stomach dropped, but he nodded, forcing a smile. “Thank you. We’ll probably have to take you up on that.”

The sun had almost completely disappeared beyond the far western mountains, the already bitter cold air turning frigid and hostile.

They’d have to stay in Windhelm for the night.

Each step felt heavier than the last as he and Erandur made their way towards the city gates. The snow was falling steadily, blowing in from the east. Packed ice and snow crunched loudly beneath their feet. Nilandur’s mind was at war with itself. They could stay at the Inn— Ulfric would never even have to know they were in the city. He could hide away until morning, pull the covers up around his ears, squeeze his eyes shut... The idea made Nilandur feel ill and dishonest. Cowardly. He was beginning to grow very tired of the feeling of cowardice. So there was only one clear option in his mind.

“Have you ever been to Windhelm before?”

Erandur’s head jerked up as if startled by the question. “No, I can’t say I have.” He exhaled and relaxed marginally.

“I imagine it was beautiful once,” Nil mused, tilting his head up to look at the looming facade of the Palace of the Kings. Guards stood at attention at the front door. One stepped in Nilandur’s path as he reached for the handle.

“State your business.”

“Oh, ah, hello. My name is Nilandur. I was one of King Ulfric’s advisors during the war for independence? I was simply stopping in for a friendly visit. That’s all.”

The guards looked at each other before promptly stepping aside, wordlessly allowing the two of them to pass.

The inside of the Palace was just as cold and hollow as Nil remembered, the echo of their footfall bouncing off the stone ceiling. It appeared they’d arrived right as the court had sat down for dinner. Ulfric sat at the head of the table, his attention given to someone sitting on his right. His eyes flickered over to Nilandur and he did a double take, expression dropping into something akin to disbelief. He pushed to his feet suddenly, the scrape of his chair against the stone floor entirely too loud amidst the quiet murmurs of the hall. All eyes turned to Nilandur. He sucked in a breath, offering a small smile, and quickly bowed.

“Your majesty.”

Ulfric said nothing, continuing to stare at him with a bit of a glazed expression. “Nilandur,” he said at last. “I didn’t expect...” His eyes trailed over Nil’s shoulder, to Erandur, then back again. “What business brings you to Windhelm?”

“That’s a long story, I’m afraid.” Nil chuckled wearily.

“Please.” Ulfric sat back down, gesturing to the table before him. “Sit. Eat. Join us.”

Surprisingly, Nilandur found it easy to talk, to recount his story. Perhaps it was from already rehashing it once, or perhaps it was simply that he’d grown distant from his misfortune. He introduced Erandur, who chose to remain silent for the majority of the conversation, staring glumly into his chalice. Nilandur didn’t blame him—to be a Dunmer in Windhelm was difficult, even in the best of situations. Nil began to feel as though he were speaking too much and for too long, baring himself a bit too genuinely for the High King’s court, but Ulfric listened with almost rapt attention. Finally, the food was gone and Nilandur was out of words.

“You’ve had quite the journey,” Ulfric said. “I’m pleased to hear that you’ve found your horse, though I can’t imagine ever going through so much trouble for a beast.”

Nilandur could feel Erandur physically prickle beside him. “She’s very special to me,” Nil said quickly and smiled. “I find that it was worth it.”

“Of course.” Ulfric rose from his seat and the rest of the court rose with him, Nil and Erandur included. “Your presence is more than welcome in the Palace this evening. We can find a spare room for the priest, as well.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Nilandur bowed.

“Thank you,” Erandur mumbled, also dipping into a bow.

“I’ll have my steward show you to your rooms.” Ulfric reached out to touch Nilandur’s elbow as he passed, stopping him. “I have a gift for you. Stop by my quarters in about an hour.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Nilandur agreed, a bit breathless.

The steward led them to Erandur’s room on the first floor of the palace. It was cold and sparsely furnished with a single sconce lighting the back wall.

“Is there nothing else available?” Nilandur asked, mildly horrified.

“Afraid not,” the steward said with a shrug before motioning Nilandur to follow him. Nil paused, watching with a creased brow as Erandur trudged across the room to throw his pack into a lone chair that sat pushed against the wall.

“I’ll be back in just a few moments, alright?”

Erandur turned and gave him a tight smile. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve been made to sleep in much worse than this. I’m thankful for the hospitality.”

Nilandur chewed his bottom lip, lingering in the doorway. “I’ll be back,” he said again.

His own room was far too large for just himself. The bed was a four poster, draped in thick red fabric. A large fire roared in the hearth. In the corner sat a large silver basin filled with hot water, steam gently curling off the surface. He pressed his ear against the wooden door and listened until the steward's footsteps faded away, leaving silence in their wake. He took a deep breath before pushing back out into the hall. He flitted silently across the stone floors and down the curving flight of steps to the first floor. Knocking once on Erandur's door, he pushed inside without waiting for an answer, closing the door swiftly behind him and falling against it.

Erandur sat on the bed, his hood pushed down around his shoulders, hands resting limply in his lap.

"I'm so sorry," Nil began, but Erandur raised his hand to silence him, looking off to the side. A long moment of silence passed between them.

"Are you going to go to him?"

Nil's breath caught in his throat. "It's not like that."

Erandur met his eyes then. "It's truthfully none of my business what it is or isn't like." He sighed. "And I shouldn't have even asked. I suppose I'm just..." He ran a hand through his hair, apparently electing not to finish his sentence.

Nilandur stepped forward, then paused, stopping in the middle of the room. He wasn't sure what to say. Erandur leaned forward, rubbing his hands over his eyes with a loud sigh.

"I need," Nilandur started, swallowing around the thick knot of tension in his throat. "I need to be able to say goodbye to him. For good, this time, I think. I'm so..." Nilandur felt anger pulse inside him, swelling his gut into something tight and thin, like the skin of a plum. "I'm so *sick* of being dragged around like this. By him. So I need to... I think this is the only chance I'll have."

Erandur looked up, the lines around his eyes and mouth pronounced, his forehead creased. He just nodded and dropped his gaze.

"I'll be back," Nil promised.

Erandur didn't respond.

----

*"So you're just leaving? After everything. You're just..." Brea made a sweeping gesture. "You're gonna just drop it?"*

*"I'm not dropping anything," Nilandur tried. "I've valued our time together. I've learned so much, but..."*

*"But what?" She let out a bitter laugh. "You're a fucking elf, Nil. You couldn't just wait fifty or so years for me to die before you fuck off?"*

*"Is that what you'd want?" He felt his pulse quickening and heat flooding his face. "You'd want to hold me captive 'til your death, simply to have the meager comforts of a threadbare relationship?"*

*"Ah ha!" She pointed at him accusingly, stepping forward to press her extended finger against his*

*chest. "I knew it! I knew it would come out if I poked at it enough. You think you can just keep this shit hidden, but it always comes out."*

*Nilandur swept her hand away, ignoring her and turning his back to continue to collect his things.*

*"How long have you felt like that? Huh, Nilly?" She followed him, stepped in front of him, ducking down to try to look him in the eyes. Her tone was playful but the edges were sharp. Nil could feel the impending explosion crackling through the air. Her signs were obvious at this point. There were few things that he would be able to say that wouldn't cause an outburst.*

*"I didn't mean to say that," he backtracked.*

*"Fuck you!" Brea yelled. "Just say it! Just say that you don't want to be with me anymore! Grow a backbone and say it! Don't just fucking run away!"*

*"I'm not running." He kept his tone calm, even, though his hands had begun to shake. He fastened his pack and turned to her with a weak smile. "I've enjoyed living with you, being your partner. I still lov--" The flat of Brea's hand connected with his face and a sharp sting ripped the words from his mouth.*

*"Don't even..." Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Her shoulders heaved with labored breath.*

*Nilandur resisted touching his face where his skin burned hot, his left ear rang. He took a deep breath through his nose and opened his mouth to speak. Brea lunged again, standing on her tiptoes to sling her arms around his neck, pressing their mouths together. Without a second thought Nilandur kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her waist to pull her against him.*

*"I hate you," she whispered against his lips.*

*"I love you," he said back, turning to press his lips to her neck. She sobbed, hands scrambling along his shoulders, fingernails digging into his shirt.*

*"Please fuck me. Please, just one last time. Just—" She yelped as Nil curled his hands around the backs of her thighs, lifted her up and carried her over to the bed.*

*It was desperate and raw. They barely undressed; Brea's smalls hung from one knee, skirt hiked up around her waist, and Nil's pants were roughly tugged down halfway. He had never been an aggressive lover, but he didn't hold back. Not this time. His climax took him by surprise and he bucked his hips with a gasp, spilling inside her.*

*"I'm sorry," he said reflexively, panting and breathless. Brea just stared up at him through half-lidded eyes, chest also heaving. Slowly, she lifted her hands to push Nil's hair out of his face.*

*"I'm gonna miss you, handsome."*

*"I can write..."*

*Brea just shook her head, her lip curling in a half-smile. "I never want to see you again."*

----

Ulfric was standing by the hearth when Nilandur entered. He looked up with a warm smile, but didn't make any motion to move towards him. Nilandur closed the door, lingering for a moment. The bed stood between them, elevated, the large stormcloak banner that hung overtop it fluttering in the heat of the fire.

"Come," Ulfric said—commanded—with a small curl of his hand. Nilandur obeyed, lifting his chin and clasping his hands behind his back as he strode across the room, giving the bed a wide berth. He kept space between them, gazing into the fire and not at Ulfric's face.

"I'm glad you came," Ulfric said, stepping closer. "I wasn't sure when I might see you next. It was a pleasant surprise."

"It was purely a coincidence." Nil smiled to soften his words.

"You've already seen your gift."

"Pardon?"

"The room," Ulfric explained. "It's yours. I've kept it for you; for when you finally arrived."

Nilandur was speechless, any possible response sticking in his throat.

"It should have everything you need," Ulfric continued, taking his silence as acquiescence. "I'll make sure you want for nothing." He stepped closer, wrapping an arm around his waist.

"Ulfric." Nilandur stepped backwards, pulling away. "I'm... not staying." He gave him a startled and confused look. "I'm just here for my horse. I thought I made that clear."

Ulfric laughed, merely a huff through his nose. "I assumed that to be for show." When Nilandur didn't elaborate, his expression turned into that of frustration. "So I only get one night with you, then? Am I always to be confined to just one night?" He reached up, tucking a strand of hair behind Nilandur's ear, and Nil immediately pulled back again.

"This needs to stop."

Ulfric was silent, expressionless.

"This," Nilandur gestured between them, "we should have never kept it going in the first place. It's unfair. Unfair to Elisif, unfair to *me*." He held Ulfric's gaze. "Surely you understand that. It puts me in an incredibly compromising position."

There was a long, ominous silence. "The dark elf is your lover, then," Ulfric said flatly.

"What!? No he isn't! What does he...? Ulfric," Nilandur began again, straightening up with a sigh. "What future do you possibly see between us?"

"Future? I have given you multiple opportunities." Ulfric's voice rose steadily. "Tirelessly, I offer you one of the most esteemed positions in all of Skyrim, and *tirelessly* you refuse me. Then, out of the blue, you turn up in my court with a *gray-skin* —"

"Esteemed position during the day, then I warm your bed at night." Nilandur deliberately ignored the casual slur directed towards Erandur. He couldn't lose momentum. Not now. His words had snapped out from somewhere beyond his control, some dark, festering corner where he hadn't

realized they'd been waiting.

Ulfric visibly bristled, drawing himself up straighter. "You dare to insult me? To insult *yourself*? To spit in my face when I offer you nothing but kindness? Nothing but luxury and comfort?"

"Spit? I spit in your face?" Nilandur let out a disbelieving laugh, pain ripping through his chest as the last thread of his carefully practiced control was pulled loose. "Do you love me?"

Ulfric's face went pale, the anger evaporating in seconds. He seemed to physically shrink away from the question, going so far as to take a step back. He didn't answer.

Nilandur sighed, shaking his head, running a hand over his face. He didn't know how much longer he could do this. His own anger dissolved, leaving him feeling hollow and exhausted.

"And if I did?" Ulfric nearly whispered.

Nilandur met his gaze, his forehead softening. "Then we would live without ever being able to openly express it. And that isn't a life I want to lead." He stepped forward, bridging the gap between them, taking Ulfric's face into his hands, stroking his thumbs across his cheekbones. "Surely you agree?"

Ulfric closed his eyes with a sigh, covered Nil's hands with his own. "Stay with me. Please. One last night." He opened his eyes, clear and blue, wet in the corners. "Please."

Nilandur pulled his hands away, stepped back, shaking his head with a pained smile. "No."

----

Erandur was still sitting in the same place when Nil pushed through the door. He immediately got to his feet, his face tight with anxiety, eyes large and imploring. Nilandur turned to shut the door and took a moment to calm his breath, pressing his forehead against the cool woodgrain before turning around.

"I..." Nil let out a small hiccup of a laugh. "I told him no." He laughed a little more. "I can't believe it." His laugh turned into a small, choked noise and he covered his mouth, closing his eyes and breathing deeply through his nose. He heard Erandur step towards him, bare feet shuffling across stone. Arms wrapped around his waist; hands slid up his back and splayed between his shoulders. Nilandur tipped forward into the hug, pressing his face to Erandur's neck, breathing him in. He smelled comforting and familiar, and Nil tightened his grip. "May I stay with you?" His voice was muffled by Erandur's hair.

"Of course."

The bed should have been too small for the both of them, but they pressed closely together beneath the thin quilt. Erandur was at Nil's back, one arm looped solidly around his waist. Exhaustion tugged at the corners of Nilandur's mind, and he did little to try to keep himself awake. Distantly, he felt Erandur's lips pressed to his shoulder, heard hushed words too soft for him to understand. As the final trails of his thoughts dissolved and Nilandur was pulled down into the darkness of sleep, he was overwhelmed with a sense of calm he hadn't felt in months. Years.

He dreamed of snow.

-

When Nilandur opened his eyes he was immediately awake: calm, quiet, bright. The pale light of morning shone through the long, thin windows, and Erandur's thumb was tracing the inside of his forearm in soft, slow motions, featherlight across his skin. The palace was quiet around them. It was still early, the night's chill hanging in the air like a whisper.

Nilandur sighed, shifting and twisting around on the cramped mattress to face the other way. Erandur looked startled and slightly sheepish, but Nil just smiled. He reached up, running a hand through Erandur's hair, tracing the strands of gray that ran along his temples. He hadn't really taken the time to feel Erandur's hair before. It was thick and heavy, silk-soft to the touch.

They were so close.

Erandur brought his hand up to Nil's face, cupping his jaw. His eyes flickered down and slowly, cautiously, he traced Nilandur's bottom lip with the pad of his thumb— a silent question. Nilandur inhaled, letting his eyes fall closed, sinking into the sensation. Erandur's skin was cool against the heat of his face, chilled from the room and a night beneath too-thin covers. Nil's heart pounded; his breathing increased. He placed a kiss against Erandur's thumbpad, nuzzled into his hand, and when he opened his eyes Erandur was staring at him as if he were something ethereal.

*Not here*, Nil thought desperately. *Please don't kiss me here*. He didn't know if he'd be able to stop him, even if he wanted to. So fiercely, though, Nilandur did not want his first memory of Erandur's lips to be beneath Ulfric's roof.

Erandur closed his eyes and shifted forward, pressing their foreheads together. He continued to run his thumb across Nil's cheek, trail his fingertips down his neck, dip beneath the collar of his shirt. Nilandur could have lived in that moment forever— a suspended state of unspoken love and soft touches. Never in his life had he felt so completely desired by someone, and at the same time given the space to simply exist. Free from expectation. It was thrilling and new, but more than anything, it felt like coming home.

He wrapped his arms tightly around Erandur's back, squeezing once and pressing a kiss to his forehead. "Ready to leave?"

Erandur sighed against his collarbone. "Yes."

They pulled themselves from beneath the covers, shivering until they donned their thick outer robes. They were ready to leave Windhelm behind and simply needed Nil's pack. He trotted quickly back up the stairs to his unused room to retrieve it, feeling light and airy.

He pushed through the door and immediately let out a startled yelp.

Ulfric was standing in the center of the room, unmoving, hands clasped behind his back and facing away from the door.



“Ulfric?” Nilandur swallowed. Closing the door behind him, he took a cautious step forward. “What are you doing in here?”

Ulfric didn’t turn around. Nilandur saw his fingers flex, curling into fists against his low back. “The disrespect of denying the gift of this room, perhaps I could overlook.” His voice was low, steady. “The pain of rejection, the ending of something that could have been rich and powerful—these things would fade over time.” He turned around then, and his expression was one of utter fury. “But *lying* to me?”

Cold terror ripped through Nilandur’s body. The hairs on his arms raised, his senses beginning to buzz like insects beneath his skin. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to *run*. “It wasn’t like that—”

“And you continue!” Ulfric roared, a crackle of the Thu’um in his voice. “I came here this morning to apologize for my actions, to humble myself, and I find your bed empty.” His hands were fists at his side. He took a step forward. Nilandur felt the door at his back. “And you have the audacity to tell me what it is I’m seeing, as if my own two eyes aren’t enough.”

“Please,” Nilandur whispered.

“This should come as no surprise to me.” Ulfric continued to walk towards him, massive and imposing. “Considering your son also enjoys the taste of *ash*. ”

“ *Don’t*. ” Fire pulsed through his veins, heat flooding into his hands and face— fear replaced immediately and viciously by anger. Nilandur drew himself up straighter. “Don’t you *dare* ...”

“Whereas last night I felt that you’d spat in the face of my gifts, my generosity, in the light of morning I say you have *pissed* all over them, like a cowardly dog.”

Nilandur was shaking— from which emotion, he wasn’t sure. He didn’t look away, though. “I am over twice your age,” he began, voice low and even. “And you speak to me as if I were a child.”

“You *act* as if you were a child.”

“I do not.” Nilandur took a deep, quivering inhale. “I can say with *certainty* that I am not acting like a child. You’ve *no idea* the trials I have endured in my life, the paths I’ve forged for myself, the lessons I’ve learned. And you have never once asked. And then to imply that my decisions are born out of some... promiscuous desire to spurn you? It makes me wonder if you ever even knew me at all.” He let out a bitter laugh that sounded foreign even to his own ears. The bitterness faded and he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “But I know me. I know my past. And it’s my past that tells me that this *future* of yours, whatever you envision for us...” He took a deep breath. “It cannot work.”

Ulfric stared him down, anger still burning behind his eyes. “Get out.”

“That was my intent.”

They were both dead silent as Nilandur grabbed his bag, checked his belongings, and slung it onto his back. He refused to cower, refused to tuck his tail or bow his head. He was not fleeing.

His fingers were curled around the door’s handle when he stopped. It felt unfinished. Did he really want the final words in this chapter of his life to be ‘that was my intent’? He turned around one last time.

“I didn’t want it to end like this.” He felt surprisingly calm, his grip on the handle loose. “I did love you— part of me still does. And I’m sorry I caused you pain. It was never my intention.”

Ulfric remained silent, his expression stony.

“But no matter how grand your vision for us might have been, it was always just that. *Your* vision. And I am very tired of simply being someone’s failed expectation... of living in someone else’s future.”

Ulfric’s expression shifted to something anguished, his jaw clenched tight. Still he said nothing.

"Goodbye, Ulfric."

## Chapter End Notes

For whatever reason, when I pasted this chapter onto AO3 it [decided to format like this](#).

I ALMOST left it like that...

*[bass boosted]* **Goodbye, Ulfric.** *[airhorns]*

# The Footfall of Giants

## Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to [jottingprosaist](#) for helping me work through this chapter.

I might not have to warn for it? But, this chapter gets a little... sexy. uwu

He and Erandur didn't speak as they left the city. Nilandur's heart, where it had felt so full that morning, had turned to stone in his chest. He was numb, barely registering the cold wind that cut at his face as they made their way across the Windhelm bridge. He wasn't sure how to process what had just transpired, or even where to begin had he wanted to. To gain a lover and lose one all within such a short span of time... Excitement was replaced by guilt, new beginnings marred by failure and doubt. It was nearly unbearable.

He just wanted to go home.

There was someone else at the stables when they approached: a rather frantic-looking Dunmer gesturing wildly at the horses.

"Surely *one* of them is for sale? Or lease?"

"I'm afraid not. You'll have to wait for the carriage to return."

"Wait!? My wife is pregnant! I need to get back to her as fast as I can. Please!" He clasped his hands together, pleading. "She's ill. She could *die* before I get her this medicine."

"I'm so sorry." The stablehand looked distressed. "I don't know what else to tell you..."

The Dunmer made a ragged, frustrated noise and hoisted his pack onto his back before jogging down the road heading south. Nilandur watched him go, an intense emotion tugging at the center of his chest. It was like... seeing himself.

Abandoning all hesitation, he cried out, "Wait!" before running after the man.

"Nilandur?" Erandur asked, startled.

Nil ignored him, sprinting after the Dunmer. The mer slowed down only marginally, glancing over his shoulder at Nil with a scowl.

"I haven't the time!"

"You can borrow my horse!"

The Dunmer skidded to a stop, sliding against the icy road and nearly losing his balance. He regained himself, turning to look at Nilandur with wide eyes, breathing heavily. "You can't be serious."

Nilandur struggled to catch his breath as well. “I am.”

“How... What’s the catch?”

“No catch.” Nil shook his head with a smile, bracing against his knees as he panted. “Just please treat her kindly. Don’t ride her too hard. And I want her back.”

Nilandur pressed a kiss to the center of Mara’s forehead, running a hand down her neck as the Dunmer, Dravin, marked his farm on his and Erandur’s map.

“Once you get to the Riften stables, cut to the right and you can’t miss us. I swear to Azura, I’ll give you all of my savings as thanks.”

“Please, that’s not necessary.” Nilandur patted Mara on the neck one final time before stepping out of the way. “Just keep yourself and Mara safe. We’ll see you by sundown tomorrow evening, travel willing.”

“Mephala cloak you.” Dravin squeezed his heels against Mara’s sides and they were off. Nil watched them go with a light heart, smiling softly to himself. Where he might have previously expected himself to be overcome with fear or anxiety, instead he found himself calm. Centered. He watched with fondness as Mara rounded the bend and disappeared out of sight. He’d be able to find her again, if he needed to.

“You’re amazing. You know that, I hope.”

He looked to his right, meeting Erandur’s eye. The wind had long died down. The snow fell silently around them as they stood at the crossroads. Windhelm loomed in the distance at their backs, the outer walls stretching towards the heavens like headstones— a mausoleum housing the corpse of his past. He was allowed to mourn, but why dwell? Why cling to misfortune and failure when there was an open road ahead of him and a warm, gentle presence at his side?

Nilandur half-shrugged, tucking a loose strand of hair behind his ear. “He needed help and I wanted to give it. It’s not so amazing.”

Wordlessly, Erandur reached up, sliding his cold fingers into Nilandur’s hair, and pulled him down to press their lips together. The kiss was short, chaste, but it burned Nil all the way to his toes. They lingered, barely an inch apart, the hot steam of their breaths hanging in the air between them.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a while, now,” Erandur murmured.

Nilandur let out a small chuckle of disbelief, resting his hands on Erandur’s hips. “I admire your patience, then.” The next kiss was less reserved, and Nilandur smiled through the entirety of it. He pulled Erandur closer, wrapped his arms tightly around his waist and lifted him onto the tips of his toes. Erandur made a low, desperate sound in the back of his throat, his fingers tightening in Nilandur’s hair, mouth opening just enough.

He kissed the exact way Nilandur liked— a methodical, rolling kind of kiss, punctuated with a reserved flick of his tongue. It felt too good to be true, as if Erandur had been waiting for him this entire time, some sort of lost other-half wandering the wilds. Nilandur laughed into the kiss, overwhelmed with joy.

They pulled apart, breathless. Nilandur relaxed his grip, shifting to bring his hands to Erandur's face and press their foreheads together. He couldn't stop smiling.

"It's cold," Erandur huffed. "What say we head south?"

"I think that's an excellent suggestion."

The sun was high in the sky by the time the snow began to fade and the creep clusters started to gather along the sides of the road. Nilandur felt physically lighter the farther away from Windhelm they got. His heart still fluttered anytime Erandur slipped his hand into Nil's for a short moment, squeezing his fingers. It was as if Erandur needed to check— to make sure it was still alright, still real. Nilandur always squeezed back, smiling to himself and feeling very much like a schoolboy.

He watched with no small amount of awe as the massive figure of a giant lumbered across the landscape, hazy in the distance. Its footfall shook the ground, rattling the breath in Nilandur's chest.

"They're docile, really," Erandur explained, perhaps sensing Nilandur's hitch. "Protective of their mammoths, and deadly when provoked, but they'll leave us alone if we do them the same courtesy."

Nilandur just stared in awe.

The warmth of the hot springs was too tempting after trudging through the cold of Eastmarch for hours on end, and they eventually stopped to make camp long before sundown. They chose for their campground a small outcropping of trees near a particularly large pool. The steam rising from the water made Nilandur's hair curl at the ends.

Excitement and nervousness prickled along his skin as they finished padding the tent and securing their belongings. Laying out their customary combined bedroll. They hadn't spoken of... *anything* ... but the thought remained in Nilandur's mind, inescapable: They were going to sleep here tonight. Together. And things were different now. Electricity danced in the air between them.

Ignoring the unspoken tension of anticipation— or perhaps enjoying it, letting it simmer, how strange and lovely— they ate a small dinner, exchanging stories and making plans for their return to Whiterun over the small campfire crackling between them. The sunlight faded into a dusky pink, and the stars began to peek through the twilight veil of the sky as darkness encroached. Nilandur leaned back on his hands with a sigh, looking up at the moons through the spindly branches of the treetops. What an adventure this had been.

Erandur shifted closer beside him, placing a hand on his knee. Nil turned his head to look at him, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

They moved into the tent without a word spoken between them. Nilandur stretched out across the bedrolls like an offering, feeling exposed but curiously not vulnerable; a moment later he curled his fingers into the front of Erandur's robes to pull him down. The coarse hairs of Erandur's beard scratched Nil's chin; his mouth was warm, his lips velvety, his breath hot as it rolled between them from a shaky exhale. Erandur bracketed Nil's head with his arms, aligned their bodies, let his weight sink down. His kisses were molasses, slow and full and sweet. They had a physical weight

to them, folding inwards, pulling Nilandur with them. Nil curled his hips up almost unthinkingly and Erandur groaned against his mouth. The sound reverberated through Nil's body like the distant footfall of giants. Erandur broke away to plant slow, even kisses on Nilandur's jaw, at the dip beneath his ear, against the hollow of his throat. Nil just tipped his head back in submission: *Anything... I'd give him anything* .

Erandur shifted to straddle Nilandur's hips, leaning back to begin undoing the fastenings of Nilandur's tunic. With each new area of skin exposed, Erandur anointed it with a kiss— slowly, deliberately— until he was trailing kisses across Nilandur's quivering stomach, tugging at the ties of his pants. Nilandur lifted his hips as the last of his vestments were removed, carded his fingers through Erandur's hair, gasped at the first hot swipe of tongue— *so hot* . A shuddering inhale quickly turned into a whimpering moan as Erandur took more, hair falling across his face, tickling Nil's stomach. Nilandur's hips curled into his mouth. It was overwhelming, too much; pleasure mingled with disbelief, suspending him in some sort of dream-like state. He was intoxicated by the unreality of it all.

"Please," he managed, tugging gently on Erandur's hair. "Please, come back."

Erandur pulled away and wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve with a concerned look. "Everything alright?"

Nilandur nodded, pawing at his robes. "Please." It was all he could say.

With great care, he managed to undress Erandur as well, pausing for slow, lingering kisses, until they were both bare and Erandur was perched in Nil's lap.

His age was more apparent now. While Nilandur did not consider himself young, Erandur had a body weathered by his decades, mottled with scars and shapeless splotches of long-faded tattoos, their meanings lost with time. Nilandur ran his hands up his sides, over his ribs, along his spine.

"My knees..." Erandur gave a pained laugh, shifting with a grimace. The laugh turned into a surprised grunt as Nil sat forward, curling his arms around Erandur's back, lifting and shifting him as best he could so that Erandur was lying down now, stretched out across the fur. His beard tickled as he laughed against Nilandur's neck. "Very gallant. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Nil spoke against his temple with a smile, then kissed his way down Erandur's face. He was still unsure of how two men were *supposed* to have sex— if Erandur might also expect Nilandur to receive. It was all new and vast and uncharted, terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

"What do you like?" Nil decided to ask. To his surprise, Erandur looked a little confused, cocking his head to the side with brows drawn together.

"I like you. And all of this," he said after a moment, reaching up to brush Nilandur's hair from his face, fingers trailing down his neck, tracing his collar bone. Perhaps he could read Nilandur's uncertainty, or perhaps he simply knew what it might be, because he added, "I'm in no rush."

Nil let out a breath, turning it into a soft laugh. He leaned down to capture Erandur's mouth. "Alright." Another kiss. "That's good."

Time became irrelevant then, lost to pure sensation. Nilandur let his hands roam anywhere they could— tracing Erandur’s harder angles, finding where his skin was the softest, wrapping around his narrow waist, brushing through the light dusting of gray hairs across his chest. Nilandur found him to be so beautiful, and he told him as much in hushed whispers against his skin. Erandur told him the same between his kisses. He said that Nil was the most beautiful person he’d ever laid eyes on... that he was so lucky.

They flushed at each other’s words and their mouths became hungrier, grips tighter and bodies more desperate. Nilandur felt sweat bead on his skin as he canted his hips. The tent was heady with their exertion, the air pulsing with energy, something primal. Nil gasped against Erandur’s neck when Erandur took them both in hand. He pressed his lips to Erandur’s pulse, eyes squeezed shut. Pleasure arced along his spine, curling into the soles of his feet, dancing down the backs of his thighs as he rocked into Erandur’s hand. Then it intensified in a way Nilandur had never felt before; his whole body jerked as he sucked in a stuttering inhale. “Gods,” he gasped, pushing up onto his hands to look between them. Erandur’s hand was glowing faintly, pulsing with Restoration magic, and Nilandur let out a small laugh of disbelief. “Quite the trick.”

Erandur smiled, threading his free hand through Nilandur’s hair to pull him back down for a slow, searing kiss as he squeezed their lengths again.

Nilandur mouthed his way across his jaw, teeth scraping through his beard, down his neck, groaning and rocking his hips. Their pace became frantic, driven by the accelerating pulse of magicka that rippled through Nilandur’s entire body. Lights danced behind his eyes. It was like being on fire, or submerged in water— consumed. Utterly consumed. He was aware only in the periphery of his senses that Erandur’s hand on his back was also pulsing with with magicka, flooding his body with light and warmth and—

When Nilandur finally spilled over, he was silent, his mouth open, forehead pressed to Erandur’s. Then, the noise rushed from him in a shuddering moan as his body seemed to expand outside of itself before contracting all at once, and the last dregs of his pleasure were pulled from him by Erandur’s hand. It was a bit filthy, the squelch of his fist, but Nilandur watched through half-lidded eyes as Erandur came, throwing his head back with a low, ragged exhale, his body tensing and arching.

Light-headed, Nil tipped forward and barely managed to fall to the side. He lay with his eyes closed for a long moment, catching his breath. His hair clung to his forehead. One hand still rested against Erandur’s chest, feeling it rise and fall with labored breaths. He let out a small laugh and rolled onto his back. His entire body felt loose in a way it hadn’t in... Well, possibly *ever*. He opened his eyes finally, looking to his left.

Erandur was smiling at him, still breathing heavily. “S’good thing we’re near a bathing pool.”

Nil laughed a bit louder than he meant to, throwing an arm over his eyes. “Yes, I suppose so.” He peeked out from beneath his arm. “Made a bit of a mess on you. I’m sorry.”

“It was a combined effort.”

They laughed. It was easy and joyful, and... In that moment it all felt worth it. His entire life had built up to this very point, and it all felt *worth it*. Because if anything had happened differently, if



any small factor had changed, had his path diverted even the slightest bit, then he wouldn't be lying beside one of the most beautiful people he'd ever had the fortune of meeting. Of *loving*.

They wiped themselves off before stumbling on wobbly legs from the tent, naked as newborns, and wading into the warm waters of the spring. The sky was dark and streaked with the light of the borealis, which jumped and danced in the water's reflection. Nilandur eased himself down on a natural ledge, resting his back against the mossy bank and pulling Erandur into his lap. The water made him nearly weightless, and Nilandur was struck by how much smaller Erandur was than himself— his hips narrower, his torso compact. Erandur leaned against Nil's chest, tipping his head back against his shoulder with a sigh, threading their fingers together.

Their conversation was sparse and slightly meandering, and Nil found himself distracted by the way Erandur's voice resonated through his back, rumbling through Nil's chest any time he spoke. He waited for a lull in the conversation to finally bring up the topic that had been quietly eating at him.

"So... At the expense of being overly formal, I still feel like I need to ask." Nilandur paused, pressing his lips to Erandur's temple and closing his eyes for a moment, calming the swirl of nervousness in his stomach.

"Yes?" Erandur prompted after another beat.

"You're all right with Whiterun? I mean, clearly I want you to live with me, but if you'd rather live somewhere else... Did you want to move in with me? Am I being presumptuous?"

Erandur shifted in his lap and was grinning when he twisted around to look at him. "I was hoping this wouldn't really be a one-off thing," he said in mock confession, and Nilandur couldn't help but laugh in relief.

"Thank heavens..."

"I love Whiterun. I'd be delighted to live there." He took Nil's face into his warm, wet hands. "With you." The soft skin around his eyes crinkled with his smile, and in that moment Nilandur had never seen anything so beautiful.

In response Nil dipped him backwards into a kiss, Erandur's head resting in the crook of his elbow, his hair suspended in the water like tendrils of black ink.

They bathed until their fingers were pruned, their faces flushed from the heat. They dried off and crawled lethargically back into the tent, sliding into the combined bed roll and clutching each other as if they might otherwise disappear. Erandur fell asleep almost immediately, his head resting against Nilandur's shoulder, damp hair clinging to his upper back. Nilandur ran the tips of his fingers absently along Erandur's spine, tracing the scars between his shoulder blades, memorizing every bump, dip, and imperfection. He stared at the top of the tent until his mind began to drift, lost in feeling happier than he could ever remember being.

He couldn't quite recall his dreams the next morning, only that they had been pleasant. But, having woken to Erandur's warm, sleepy kisses against his chest and neck, he quickly decided that the waking world was much more pleasant than any dream might have been.

## Two Septims

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“It smells a bit funny. Does it smell funny to you?”

“It *has* sat empty for a long while.”

“Yes, well, *emptiness* doesn’t usually smell like that.”

“Nilandur.” Erandur’s lips quirked into an amused smile. “Take a minute. Look around.” He reached up and slid his fingers through the hair at the base of Nil’s neck to gently pull him down for a kiss. Nil exhaled, bending his head forward, relaxing ever so slightly.

It had only been six months. Seven, technically, if he counted when they first met. And yet the passing of the months felt both like an age and no time at all. Erandur slipped seamlessly into Nilandur’s life, as if he’d always been there. It felt effortless to love him— to allow himself to be loved by him. He felt a giddy sort of satisfaction, an insight into partnership that had once remained so foreign to him. The envy he’d felt watching Aerik and Teldryn had completely dissipated. In its place there was a sense of understanding as they orbited each other like moons, magnetic and reflective. It was familiar, rejuvenating. Nilandur had never felt so inspired.

And it was this inspiration that had led him to look into the abandoned shop front that had stood empty for as long as he’d been living in Whiterun.

Erandur pulled away, letting his hand trail down Nil’s arm as he stepped around him. “I’ll be outside. Take your time.”

The door clicked shut and Nilandur took a deep breath. The old building was silent, as if waiting. The muffled sounds of the Whiterun marketplace seeped beneath the door and through the rippled glass windows: people calling to each other, chickens clucking, children laughing. The building had watched the city grow up around it, sitting apart, empty. It had watched as a multitude of lives swirled around it, vibrant and joyous— as babies were born, as the elderly passed away.

What histories had these walls seen? What stories could they tell?

Nilandur wandered through the downstairs, running his hand across the dusty countertop, peering into cobwebbed cupboards. He moved a stack of forgotten books, long lost to water damage. The dust motes swirled to life in the air, making him sneeze.

He wandered upstairs, the floorboards creaking beneath his feet. The space alone was almost the size of their current flat. The stone fireplace extended to the second story, making for an easy setup for a kitchen. Nilandur could see where their bed could go, where he could set up a small folding partition...

He imagined Erandur reclined in his favorite chair near the hearth, a book propped in his lap, nearly nodding off, the way he always did after they'd had dinner and tea. Nilandur would wake him and he'd shuffle sleepily over to the bed, pulling Nil down with him, warm and gentle and soft.

The windows were south-facing. He could even grow some potted plants if he wanted. The kinds that needed a warmer climate. Maybe even some that were native to Summerset...

Someone laughed outside in the marketplace and Nilandur came back to himself, dabbing at his eyes where a sudden wetness had gathered. He laughed, gave the room a final once-over, and retreated back down the steps.

Erandur was speaking to two children when Nilandur pushed back out into the midday sun. He wandered over curiously.

"Please!" one of the children begged, clasping her hands together with great melodrama.

Erandur crossed his arms over his chest, putting on a stern face. "Find me again when you're sixteen, and we'll see if you both feel the same."

"But we want to be married now!"

"Mara's love is, above all else, *patient* ." He gently turned the girl around and gave her a light shove. "And you must learn patience yourself before making a decision like that."

"Aww..." The girl slumped forward, taking her friend by the hand and leading her back down the path.

"Solicitations for wedding services?" Nilandur asked, unable to keep the smile from his face.

Erandur let out a long breath, lowing his hood and scratching the back of his head. "My youngest yet." He turned to face Nil, tipping his head back and accepting a quick kiss. "So? Any revelations?"

Nervousness fluttered in Nil's stomach. "I..." He cleared his throat, forcing a smile. "Well, if I'm honest..."

Erandur waited a beat, then raised an eyebrow. "...Yes?"

"I love it," Nil blurted, immediately covering his mouth to hide his smile. "I want it."

Erandur did not cover his own smile. "Then you'll have it." He pulled Nil down for another kiss. "You deserve it."

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Nilandur was in the back office sorting through the most recent orders when the front door bell softly chimed, a warm breeze sweeping through the store.

“I’ll be with you in one moment!” he called over his shoulder, shuffling the papers and sorting them into their appropriate boxes.

He’d only been open for three months. *The Dappled Leaf: Teas and Remedies*. The shop was an immediate success, which meant he was also up to his eyeballs in paperwork— endlessly placing orders for ingredients and packaging orders to be sent out, not to mention preparing his own homemade blends. His snowberry tea barely lasted a day on the shelves before he had to make more.

Then of course, once Taarie had caught word of his new business endeavor, all of Solitude was hungry for his specialty blends. She’d helped him set up an agreement with the East Empire Trading Company that had provided him with discounted imports. At first he hadn’t thought much of the idea, planning to work with only local plants. But after tasting a Shimmerine royal blend for the first time in almost forty years, Nilandur had nearly wept.

He finished sorting the stacks, took a moment to fix his hair, and wandered back out into the main store front. “Let me know if there’s— Oh!”

Pavo and Gat stood inspecting one of the shelves of custom blends.

“Good heavens, what a wonderful surprise!” Nil walked out from behind the counter to offer them both a warm handshake. “What on Nirn has brought the two of you to Whiterun?”

“Passing through on our way to Riften!” Pavo replied cheerfully. “We heard about your shop and wondered if it was the same Altmir that had helped us those many months ago.”

Gat offered a tucky smile. “We wanted to show our support.”

“Well, I’m incredibly grateful. Please, come! I just finished steeping my newest blend for samples. Let me pour you both a cup.”

They gathered around the small table in the back of the store, sitting cross-legged on pillows as Nilandur passed the tea bowls around. The conversation was easy and light, and Nilandur looked Gat in the eye and didn’t flinch when his fingers brushed Nil’s to accept the cup. It felt good. He felt healthy and proud of himself.

“Where’s your husband?” Pavo asked, jolting Nil enough to slosh a bit of tea out of his cup.

He laughed nervously, wiping his hand on his robe and clearing his throat. “You mean Erandur? He’s not... We’re not—”

“I didn’t mean to presume,” Pavo amended, a deep red flush darkening his complexion even further.

“Oh, no, you’re quite alright.” Nil laughed again, taking a small sip of tea. “We’re together, just not married.”

Pavo let out a soft exhale, offering a sheepish smile. “Well, we’re on our way to Riften for just that reason.” He looked to Gat with an expression that Nilandur knew well.

“I’m so happy for the both of you. Truly.”

“I figured a priest of Mara would be the first to suggest marriage,” Gat mused before knocking back the rest of his tea.

Nilandur felt a small, nervous lump form in the pit of his stomach. “Well, it’s only been six months...”

“It’s certainly none of our business,” Pavo insisted, his fond look turning into a stern one, and Gat’s broad form recoiled sheepishly. He turned back to Nil with a smile. “You make a lovely couple, regardless.”

Nilandur saw them off with several free samples to bolster their various purchases. The interaction had left him feeling drained and he decided to close down the shop an hour early, shuttering the windows and locking up the front door. He trotted up the stairs and changed into one of his robes before beginning preparations for dinner.

Delicate tendrils of anxiety had wormed into his mind, snaking through his thoughts, keeping him distant.

Why *hadn’t* Erandur suggested marriage? It was one of the highest manifestations of Mara’s love for mortals, or so her priests believed. Surely he had good reason not to ask. It had only been such a short amount of time... Perhaps he knew not to trust Nilandur’s ability to commit. Maybe Erandur was simply waiting, watching, seeing if Nilandur would abandon him, just as he’d always abandoned—

He paused in his dicing, the onions bringing tears to his eyes.

He didn’t have to think about himself that way anymore. He was a good partner. A loving father. A caring friend. Nilandur always put others before himself. He was not a failure.

He repeated the mantra in his head, breathing deeply a few times before sliding the onions into the cooking pot. They sizzled in the oil, immediately filling the room with their smell. He quickly diced the carrots, tomatoes, and leeks before adding them to the pot, then gave everything a quick stir before adding water and covering the mixture to stew.

Nilandur sighed and wiped his brow on the back of his arm, deciding how to fill his time while he waited. He skittered through the house, cleaning and organizing, too jittery to sit down. He breathed and continued his mantra any time the more insidious thoughts attempted to creep their way back into the forefront of his mind. After a while, the churning waters of his mind began to calm and he felt more at ease.

He tucked one final nickname away into their bedside drawer and shoved it closed. Something inside jingled. Nil paused, slowly opening the draw back up to run his fingers along the bottom. He pulled out two gold coins. *His lucky coins.*

Magelight illuminated a forgotten corner of his mind, and he couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. He quickly put the two coins back and closed the drawer, giddy beyond words. Downstairs he heard the back door open, slow footfall ascending the stairs.

“Something smells delicious,” Erandur said as he rounded the corner, pulling back his hood. Nil trotted over to him, immediately sweeping him up into a hug followed by a kiss.

“Well, that’s quite nice.” Erandur chuckled, running his fingers through Nilandur’s hair. “What’s got you in such a lovely mood?”

“I can’t simply be happy to see you?” Nil asked, placing another kiss at the corner of Erandur’s mouth, then along his jaw.

“I suppose you can.” Erandur guided him back down for a slower kiss.

Nilandur told him about running into Pavo and Gat while they ate dinner, intentionally leaving out that they were traveling to Rifthaven to be married. Erandur seemed distracted enough not to care, his gaze sliding down Nilandur’s neck, lingering on his exposed chest, becoming more and more heated as time passed. Nil loved when Erandur looked at him like that— like he wanted to devour him.

As Nil was cleaning their plates from dinner, Erandur stepped up behind him and slid his arms around Nil’s waist, pressed slow kisses along his back and shoulder. Nilandur let himself be led to their bed. He let himself be guided down onto the mattress, slowly undressed, let his body be traced and mapped by Erandur’s warm hands, his insistent mouth.

Nilandur had always referred to sex of any kind as ‘making love,’ simply because it sounded less crude than ‘fucking’, but he now realized how foolish that had been.

He supposed one day he and Erandur might fuck, just to experience the primal need of it— to selfishly retreat into their own bodies and snarl and rut like moon-drunk beasts.

But for now, Nilandur swallowed Erandur’s moans like honey, buried his nose into the crook of his neck and pulled him into his lungs. He molded himself around him like a cocoon, pressed inside him until they were flush, two beings that ended where the other began. In those moments there was no separation; the threads of their reality were woven back together again with their undulations. And when Nilandur spilled over that evening, his lips pressed against Erandur’s fluttering pulse, he felt completely certain that he would never tire of this man so long as there was still breath within him.

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“Is it enough metal?”

The blacksmith rolled the coins between her fingers with a thoughtful nod. “For two rings? Should be plenty.” She extended her hand, palm up, the two gold septims catching the light. “Did you want to do it? It’s a fairly simple process.”

“What? Oh, heavens no.” Nilandur laughed. “I barely know how to smelt, much less make jewelry.”

“You could always learn,” she pointed out with a smirk.

Nilandur swallowed, opened his mouth to refuse again, then closed it. There was no reason not to try. “You’ll help me?”

She nodded as Nil took the coins from her hand. “We can probably make them in a day.”

“What if I mess them up and they’re hideous?”

She laughed. “Then we melt them down and you try again.”

----

Nilandur reached into his pocket and rolled the rings between his fingers. Nervous energy thrummed through his body like electrical current. He’d talked himself out of the idea one hundred times, and talked himself back into it one hundred and one. *It’s too soon*, he kept insisting. *It’s now or never*, he would argue. Erandur had changed out of his priest’s robes and into a simple tunic and loose pants. His dark hair was well past his shoulders now, pulled back into a loose braid, courtesy of Nilandur.

“Ready to go?” he asked with a smile.

Nil responded with a jerky nod and an overly-enthusiastic smile.

Mara knickered at them as they approached the stables, and Nilandur laughed some of the tension away. He took a moment to hold her head against his chest, running a hand down her neck, taking deep breaths. He felt Erandur brush a hand across his low back as he moved around him to grab the saddle pad and bridle. They’d be riding double since it was such a short journey. They could have just as easily walked, but Mara’s presence was both a comfort and a good omen. Nilandur wanted her blessing.

The sky was bright and clear, the air crisp with the smells of autumn and a cold nip of fast-approaching winter. Erandur’s hands were warm against Nil’s sides where he’d slipped them beneath Nil’s outer cloak, holding him tightly as Nil guided Mara down the cobbled road past Honningbrew Meadery. They made a right at the river to head towards Riverwood, but turned off the main road to wind along a thin deer trail that cut into the hillside. The Whiterun planes stretched before them, dappled with rocks and sparse clusters of spruce and juniper. Clouds dotted the sky in clusters, with fluffy white caps like tundra cotton and dark bottoms, as flat as paperweights.

They stopped at a particularly large, smooth boulder that jutted out from the hillside. They slid from Mara’s back and Erandur removed her bridle to let her graze. Nilandur lay a blanket out across the rock and they both settled down, pulling their prepared food from their packs.

Nilandur’s palms were sweating so badly that he had to ask Erandur to open the wine. He took a greedy gulp as soon as his cup was filled, hoping it would still his nerves. It didn’t work.

They ate and chatted about mundane things—made vague plans for their future: trips to take, cities to visit, skills to learn. It was soothing. They indulged in mild gossip concerning some of the Whiterun locals and Nilandur bit back laughs, pressing his face against Erandur’s shoulder to hide



his smile. The food and wine slowly disappeared, and Nilandur's nervousness spiked when he felt the time drawing nearer.

"Beautiful day," Erandur commented, leaning back against his hands.

*Maybe not today. Maybe another day.* "It really is."

"I actually quite like the winter," Erandur continued.

"Oh?" Nilandur touched the rings in his pocket again.

"I know many tend to hate it, but I think it's beautiful. It's a time to turn inward and become meditative. The days shorten, the light recedes."

"You don't find the darkness frightening?" Nilandur was sure his voice sounded strained—panicked.

"No, not at all. Not anymore. I think once you've been acquainted with sinister forces as much as I have, it's easy to find comfort in benign darkness. Besides..." He looked over at Nilandur with a fond smile. "It's an excellent excuse to nestle in close with the ones you love."

"Will you marry me?"

Erandur's expression dropped, his eyes going wide. He jerked to sit upright, his brows drawing together in confusion and concern. Nilandur swallowed the lump in his throat, convinced that if he opened his mouth again he'd be sick all over himself and Erandur. So he waited.

"You're serious?" Erandur said after a painfully long moment of silence.

Nil nodded mutely, pulling the rings from his pocket with shaking hands. "If you don't..." He sucked in a breath, his face flushing hot. "What I mean is, if it's too soon, I understand. I know—" Erandur pushed into his space, cupping his jaw and pressing their lips together. A small whimper escaped as Nil exhaled, curling the rings into his fist. The kiss was slow and deliberate. Reassuring. Erandur brought his other hand to Nil's face, holding him there, rubbing his thumbs across the high arch of his cheeks. Behind them Mara snorted and shook her head, methodically pulling up grass.

"You're sure?" Erandur whispered after he finally pulled away.

"Incredibly," Nil replied, reaching up with his free hand to cup the back of Erandur's neck. He smiled. "Terrifyingly sure."

"But..." Erandur leaned back, uncertainty marring his features.

Nilandur's heart lurched. He was only theoretically prepared for rejection. There was a far-too-real part of him that knew he might not be able to handle it. He swallowed, waited, feeling shivery and ill.

"What if I'm not *me*?" Erandur finished, seeming to barely squeeze the words out.

It was Nil's turn to be confused. He let out a shaky breath. "I'm not sure I understand."

Erandur still held Nil's face in his hands, his expression twisting into something anguished. "What if you discover that I'm... *worse*? That— That none of my memories... are mine?" He swallowed.

“What if you bind yourself to a— a *monster* ?”

Nil let out a breath, turning it into a small laugh. *That?* That was his concern? He wasn’t afraid of Nil running out on him, disappointing him, failing as a partner. He was afraid of himself. *Still.* After everything they’d been through. Nilandur felt lighter, more confident. He leaned forward for a short kiss.

“Then I will spend every day reminding you of the reasons I fell in love with *you* . Until the monster doesn’t have a single leg to stand on.”

He placed a kiss on Erandur’s cheek, his jaw, in the crook of his neck. He wrapped an arm around his waist, the shake in his own hands slowly receding. Erandur leaned into him, releasing his face to slide his arms around Nil’s shoulders, pressed his nose against his shoulder with a shuddering inhale.

“I love you,” Nil murmured into his ear. “ *So* much. And I want to continue walking through life beside you. No matter who we become.”

There had always been a level of uncertainty while he’d planned his proposal— his stomach had been too knotted, his mind too turbulent to think beyond his own fears. He’d plotted and planned for every possible way Erandur might reject him. He’d steeled himself for refusal, armored himself against scorn.

But there was no way he could have prepared for this, as Erandur sat crumpled against him, curling inwards, making himself impossibly small. Something finally seemed to break as his sides heaved and he sobbed quietly, hoarsely against Nil’s shoulder, his entire body shaking as he clung to the lapels of Nil’s robes. And Nil held him, pulled him into his lap even more, cradled his head and rocked him through it.

When his shuddering subsided and his breathing became even, Erandur pulled back, a look of bewilderment on his face. He rubbed vigorously at his swollen eyes, twisting a cough into a laugh. “I’m... so sorry.” He glanced up at Nil, sniffing and managing a smile. “Didn’t quite expect to have that reaction.” He cleared his throat. “Start over.”

Nilandur laughed, his giddiness turning almost manic as he held Erandur even tighter. “Start over? From which point?” he goaded. “Hello, my name is Nilandur. Apparently it means ‘tender of gardens’.”

Erandur laughed and took Nil’s face in his hands again, pressing their foreheads together before shifting to kiss his cheek.

“Will you marry me?” Nil asked, his lips brushing Erandur’s jaw where his beard had grown thick.

“Yes.” It was barely above a whisper. Nil wrapped him up in his arms, pulled him closer, buried his nose in his hair. The rings were still clutched tightly in his fist, warmed to the temperature of his skin. Once they finally separated with watery laughs, rubbing at their eyes, Nil presented them.

“Oh...” Erandur picked one up, cupping it in his hand as if it were something fragile and precious. “It’s so beautiful.”

“It’s just a gold band,” Nil argued, flushing. “But I did make them myself.”

“You did?” Erandur looked up at him with an awestruck expression. “I didn’t know you knew how to make jewelry.”

“I learned. For this.”

Erandur wordlessly slid the ring onto his finger, and to Nilandur’s quiet delight, it fit perfectly. “Amazing,” Erandur murmured, twisting the band a few times. He reached out and took the other ring from Nil’s palm, turned his hand over, and gently slid it onto Nil’s finger as well. The action sent a shiver up Nil’s arm. The sensation traveled through the rest of his body when Erandur brought his hand up for a kiss, his lips soft and warm against his knuckles.

“We’ll have to find someone else to perform the rites,” Erandur said with a hoarse chuckle. “I refuse to officiate my own wedding.” His grin threatened to split his face in two and Nilandur’s heart fluttered. *Wedding*. They’d have a wedding. Because they were getting married. Because Erandur said ‘yes.’

“I’m sure we can find someone to do the job.”

“Know other priests of Mara, do you?”

“Hmm... Well, we could travel to RIFTEN. Make the time-honored pilgrimage.” Nil paused. “Or maybe Mara will do it.”

Erandur looked momentarily confused, then burst into laughter. “The horse??”

“Have some faith! She’s incredibly qualified.”

Erandur kissed him through a smile.

And, yes, Nilandur was quite certain that this was what happiness felt like.

## Chapter End Notes

We made it guys!! And whoo, what a journey.

I didn't know writing Nilandur's story would end up meaning as much to me as it did. I knew it would be difficult, and I knew he would challenge me - (finding his voice in the beginning was difficult).

But I didn't realize how much more I'd be able to fall in love with his character, and also learn a lot about myself in the process.

I remember, very clearly, feeling so *angry* with him in the beginning. Writing chapters three and four, I just felt like he was so pathetic. "How could anyone like a character like this, who just lets himself be dragged around and bullied by life? Who thinks so poorly of himself and puts himself into these terrible situations??"

But of course, I was angry at myself.

Nilandur is a mirror - and from what many of you have expressed, he's a mirror for a lot of us. He embodies everything I wish I could be: kind, compassionate, patient,

accepting. While also harboring things I hate about myself: passivity, fearfulness, shame, guilt.

Watching him heal, *helping* him heal, I helped myself heal a little bit, too. I apologize less. I'm not afraid to say 'no' to people. I carve out space to exist. My hope is that any of you who have come to this story - no matter what state you've come to it in - can take these lessons to heart as well.

We don't have to apologize for existing. We are worthy of love. Others are suffering alongside us. And, in our own ways, we all have the ability to heal.

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I'm in the process of writing a short epilogue, and there will most likely be a fanart chapter! If you've drawn fanart, I'd love to feature it. <3

# Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to spiney for being a wicked beta for this last little installment! I needed the kick in the ass, for sure.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There came a day when they decided Erandur needed his own horse. There were several fine choices among the new horses at the Whiterun stables, including a stunning roan that Nilandur tried to gently nudge in Erandur's direction. Instead, Erandur became fixated on a massive black beast of a horse whose ears seemed to be perpetually pressed flat, its eyes wild and wide, a mean, unpredictable thing. It tried to bite Aerik, who laughed and called it a 'project pony.' It was, frankly, the most ill-tempered horse Nilandur had ever met. But Erandur couldn't be dissuaded and handed over the money eagerly.

"What will you name her?" Teldryn asked as Erandur guided the mare to her stall. She lashed her head and pulled against her lead, nostrils flaring.

"I'm not sure yet," he replied thoughtfully, and Nilandur was baffled by how calm everyone seemed to be in the face of such a terrifying creature.

All through the next month Erandur spent his evenings at the barn, working with his horse. He would return bitten and bruised, but he'd smile and assure Nil that they were making progress, and Nilandur would quietly fret over his wounds and pretend not to be bothered.

But, over dinner one evening, Nil found the anxiety had eaten at his last nerve. "Why did you have to get that horse?" he asked explosively.

Erandur blinked at him, pausing mid-chew. "What do you mean?"

"What if it hurts you and I'm not around? What if it kills you?"

"She's not going to kill me," Erandur assured with a small laugh. "She's been hurt; probably abused."

Nil averted his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest, tucking his lips around his teeth to keep from saying anything else.

"She's learning to trust again," Erandur insisted. "It'll take time."

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Summer rolled through Skyrim in the form of rain. Lots of it. The cold air blowing down from the Pale clashed with the warm air pushing up from Falkreath, and despite the shelter of the Throat of the World, Whiterun often found itself caught in the midst of incredible thunderstorms.

It was one such evening, when lightning crashed loudly in the darkened sky, that Nil's and Erandur's dinner was interrupted by frantic knocking on their back door. It was Jervar, the stable owner's son, soaked to the bone.

"Your horse is going to knock down the barn!" he yelled over the thunder and rain.

Erandur beckoned him inside and shut the door against the noise. Nilandur lingered on the stairs, twisting the belt of his robe between his fingers.

Erandur's brow furrowed with urgency and concern. "What's wrong with her?"

"The storm," Jervar continued, still yelling and clearly frustrated. "She's been kicking at her stall for nearly twenty minutes, rearing and bucking!" He pushed his wet hair back from his eyes. "Father told me to come get you before she knocks down a wall, hurts the other horses... or herself."

Erandur nodded and began to climb the stairs. "Just give me a few moments to change and I'll walk back down with you."

Nilandur poured Jervar a cup of tea while Erandur readied himself upstairs— his snowberry blend, something to warm the boy up a bit and shake the chill from the rain. Jervar only grumbled his thanks, but he appeared visibly calmer by the time the cup was drained and Erandur was hurrying back down the stairs in his riding clothes.

"Please," Nil whispered as Erandur passed, placing a hand against his cheek. "Be careful?"

Erandur smiled and reached up to cup Nil's face, pulling him down for a kiss. "I will be. I promise."

Erandur and Jervar set out into the night, and a massive crack of thunder shook the house; Nilandur nearly jumped out of his skin. He wandered back upstairs and sat by the fire. How many ways, he wondered, could a person be killed by a horse? Trampled to death seemed like the most fatal option, or one well-placed kick to a vital organ. Nilandur chewed his nails, watching the flames flicker in the hearth, wondering how long he'd wait— how long would it take for the stable hand to fetch him if something happened? Lightning split the sky, momentarily lighting up the darkened room, immediately followed by another deafening crack of thunder; Nilandur leapt to his feet.

Quickly and deftly donning his barn clothes, Nilandur flitted down the back stairs and out the door. The rain was coming down in sheets, swept horizontally by gusts of strong wind. The signs for the surrounding shops swung wildly in the gale, squeaking on their hinges. Nilandur cast a small ward above his head, shielding himself from the worst of the rain as he jogged down the main thoroughfare and through the city gates.

The sky crackled with another flash of lightning, illuminating the road as he rounded the bend and passed beneath the final portcullis. The stables were in sight. He nearly held his breath as he ran, ears straining against the roar of the rain. His shoes and pants were completely soaked when he finally dropped his ward and stepped into the barn. The rain hammered against the wooden roof,

small trickles of moisture beading along the cracks and trickling down the beams. Nilandur's heart was in his throat as he approached the stall that housed Erandur's horse. The barn was silent. He feared the worst.

Cautiously, Nilandur peered over the stall door, wrapping his hands around the rough wood. His shoulders sagged as he sighed with relief.

The horse was sprawled out on the floor, her stomach rising and falling with labored breath as her head rested in Erandur's lap. He was slowly running his hand along her neck, murmuring to her in a soft, low voice. Her eyes were still wide, staring blankly as her sides heaved. Nilandur watched her face for a moment longer, feeling a gentle tug at his heart when he noticed tear streaks dampening her fur. While a rational voice in the back of his mind reminded him that horses did not cry, not the same way elves did, he couldn't help but wonder...

Poor, wretched creature.

"She was frightened," Erandur said, just barely audible above the roar of the rain.

Nilandur tore his eyes from the horse's face to meet Erandur's gaze. "Is she... alright?" he asked, afraid to raise his voice.

Erandur nodded, continuing his long, soothing strokes along the side of her neck. The slow, methodical movement of his hand nearly lulled Nilandur into a trance. He counted the strokes, timed them with his breath, lost himself in the numbing noise of the rain beating against the barn roof.

Slowly—or perhaps suddenly; Nilandur had a difficult time determining which—the rain began to lighten. Nil straightened up, his back popping as he stretched.

"Darling?" Erandur's voice was soft and low, and it took Nilandur a moment to realize he was addressing him.

"Hmm? Yes?"

"Will you grab a feed bucket and bring it in here?"

Nilandur smiled, softly stepping away from the stall door. "Of course."

Nervousness prickled along the back of Nilandur's neck as he balanced the feed bucket on one hip and opened the stall door with his free hand. The horse immediately shifted as he entered, folding her legs beneath her to sit upright. Nilandur faltered, felt his weight shift away, ready to back out of the stall.

"She's fine," Erandur encouraged, still seated beside her. "Just bring her food here."

Cautiously, Nil crept forward, grasping the feed bucket with both hands. The horse jerked her head back as Nil approached, the whites of her eyes flashing as her nostrils flared.

"It's alright," Erandur murmured, running a hand down her neck.

Nil swallowed the nervous lump in his throat and sank to his knees holding out the feed bucket. Miraculously, the horse's ears perked up. She leaned towards him and nosed the rim of the bucket, her breath warm and smelling of hay. After a moment, she tentatively dipped her nose into the

bucket, followed by the sounds of her softly lipping at the grain as her ears relaxed. Only when the crunching began did Nilandur exhale. He looked to Erandur with a wary smile; his husband was grinning at him, hair still slick and wet from the rain, and he looked beautiful. And happy. Nilandur reached up and ran a hand between the horse's eyes, trailing his fingers through her forelock.

"Sweet girl," he murmured.

The walk back to their house was soggy, but pleasant. Nilandur could feel his feet pruning in his socks, squelching with every step, but he didn't mind. The smell of wet earth rose through the warm, humid night air; riverfrogs peeped loudly in the distance, torchbugs slowly emerged from their cover, and Erandur slipped his hand into Nil's.

Nilandur thought he understood, then, at least a little—why Erandur had fixated on that horse, had made it his goal to give her a chance even when nobody else would.

"I've learned her name, I think," Erandur said.

With the silence between them broken, Nil perked up. "Oh?" He gave Erandur's hand a light squeeze. "What might it be?"

Erandur didn't respond right away, but a soft, sad smile creased the lines of his face in the torchlight as they approached the city gates. "Cassie."

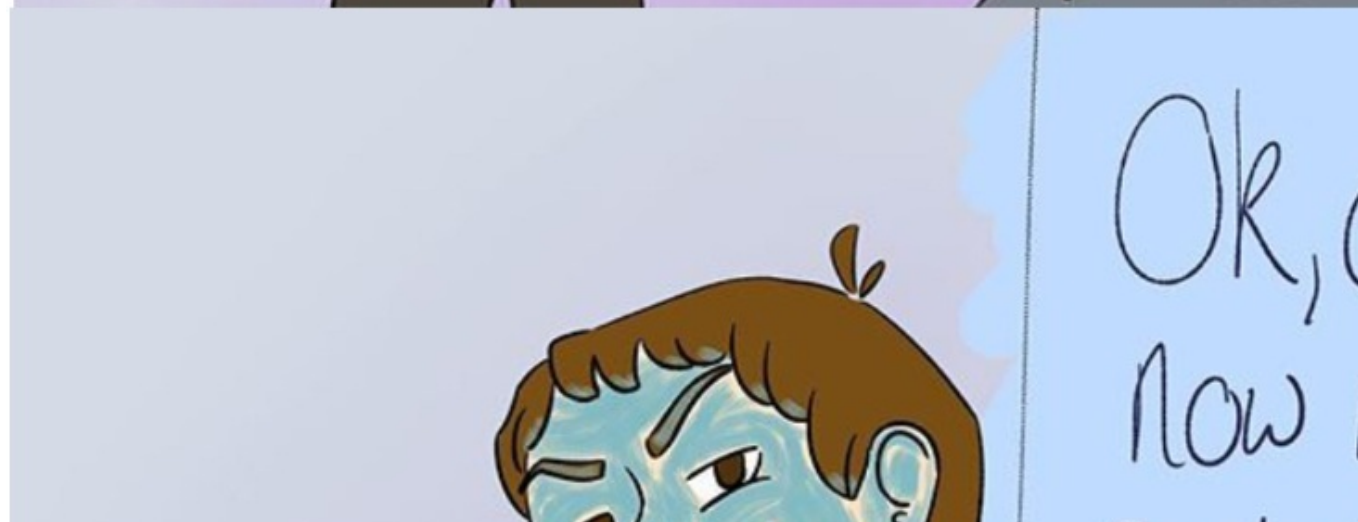
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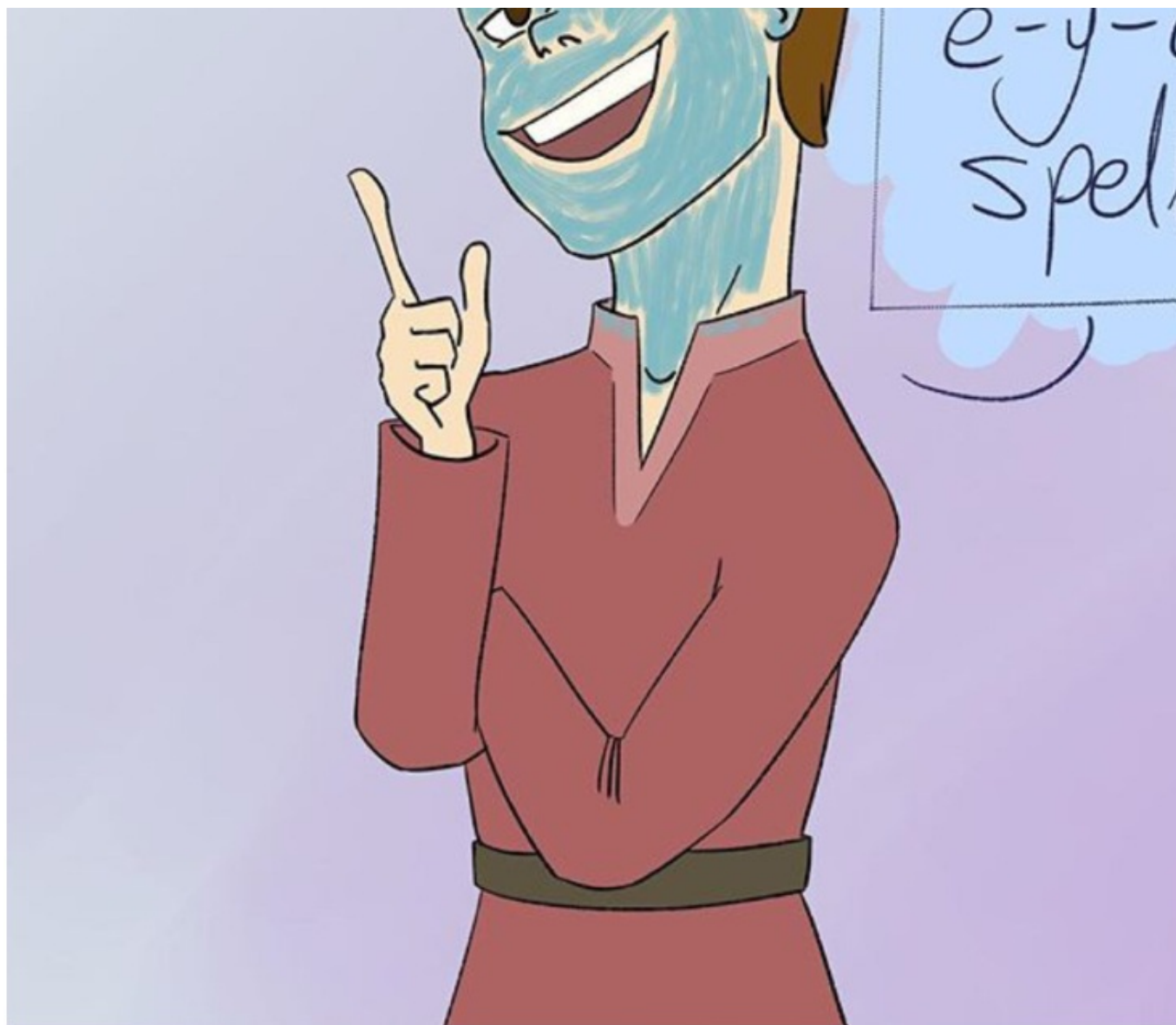


















By @phish

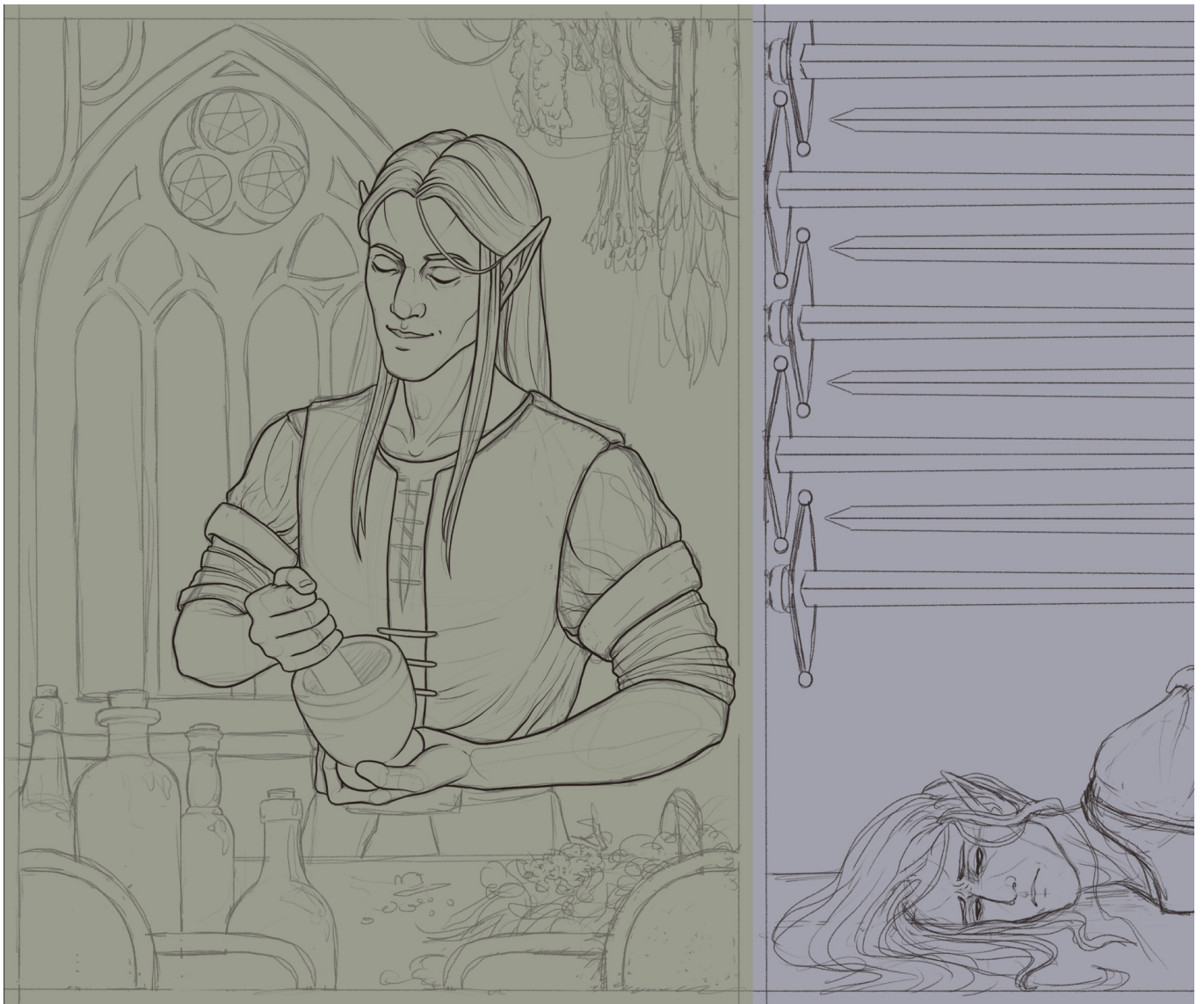






ART (by me)















## Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much, to everyone, for reading this story!! It was definitely a roller coaster for me, but in the end I really loved writing it. Nilandur is so near and dear to my



heart, and I love how much others love him.

If you've drawn fanart and I missed it/forgot to include it, let me know!!

Until next time~

<3 Topsy

## End Notes

Kudos and comments are always appreciated!~

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!